



## 80s Era NBA + 40: Part Seven

### *The Milwaukee Bucks – Never Their Time*

By Michael Hamel

On January 17, 1988, Ulysses Lee Bridgeman stood on the court at the Mecca in Milwaukee, at halftime of the Bucks' game against the Cleveland Cavaliers. Bridgeman, better known as Junior, had played nine-plus years with the Bucks until a knee injury the previous March ended his career.<sup>1</sup> Now, his number was being retired. Despite rarely starting, the 6'5" swingman was the Bucks' all-time leader in games played, and ranked fifth in scoring with 9892 points.<sup>2</sup> Bridgeman was being honored as one of the best sixth men of his generation, and for his "gentlemanly" demeanor.

Commissioner David Stern was in attendance. Former Milwaukee head coach Don Nelson addressed the crowd, despite a falling out with Bucks owner Herb Kohl that had led Nelson to walk away from the final two years of his contract at the end of the 1986-87 season.<sup>3</sup> Cleveland general manager Wayne Embry was there too, fittingly, since Embry had brought both Bridgeman and Nelson to Milwaukee a decade earlier while working for the Bucks.<sup>4</sup>

Nelson, Embry, and Bridgeman were three of the key ingredients for an era of Bucks history that is remembered mostly for how close they came to greatness – without ever achieving it.

It all began with an unhappy superstar.

The Bucks had joined the NBA in 1968, drafted Boston Celtics backup center Wayne Embry and 17 others in an expansion draft, and suffered through a 27-55 inaugural season. Then the Bucks won a coin flip for the number one pick in the 1969 draft and selected center Lew Alcindor from UCLA. Years later, head coach Larry Costello summarized what happened next: "[Alcindor] did so much for this franchise. There was no building period, almost an instant championship."<sup>5</sup> Milwaukee won 56 games in 1969-70, acquired Oscar Robertson from the Cincinnati Royals that summer, and won the title in 1971 as Alcindor was named the MVP for both the regular season and the playoffs.

Four years later, a year after losing to the Celtics in the 1974 Finals, the Bucks' superstar center, who now referred to himself as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, decided he wanted out of Milwaukee. Embry, who had taken over as the Bucks' general manager in 1972, was forced to decide whether to hang onto an unhappy player until his contract expired in 1977, or negotiate with Abdul-Jabbar's two chosen destinations: New York and Los Angeles.

On June 16, 1975, after four weeks of negotiations, Embry and Bucks president Bill Alverson announced they had struck a deal with the Los Angeles Lakers. Abdul-Jabbar would head west (with throw-in Walt Wesley) for four young players, including 26-year-old center Elmore Smith and the Lakers' 1974 first-round selection, Brian Winters. The Lakers had also used their two 1975 first-rounders to take players that the Bucks wanted as part of the deal: forward Dave Meyers from UCLA and swingman Junior Bridgeman from Louisville.<sup>6</sup> "There's no doubt that we regret seeing Kareem go," Embry told reporters. "But we had to be realistic, and when a situation like this happens, you do it."<sup>7</sup>

This time, there would be no "instant championship." Over the next four years the Bucks posted a regular season record of 150-178. They continued to add pieces to their young talent base, but the most important addition was

behind the bench. Embry had lured his former Celtics teammate Don Nelson to Milwaukee to serve as Costello's assistant in the fall of 1976. In late November, under pressure from new majority owner Jim Fitzgerald – who had disliked the Abdul-Jabbar trade – Costello and Embry resigned. Embry remained with the team as a consultant and Nelson ascended to head coach.<sup>8</sup> In April, Nelson was also given the title of player personnel director, setting the stage for him to construct the 80s Era Bucks.<sup>9</sup>

The 80s Era was dominated by the Los Angeles Lakers, Boston Celtics, and Philadelphia 76ers, but the Milwaukee Bucks were not far behind. Their combined regular season and playoff record of 468-267 was the fourth-best of the period, comfortably ahead of the fifth-place Phoenix Suns.

TEAM	W	L	Pct
Boston	575	211	.732
LA Lakers	557	219	.718
Philadelphia	516	243	.680
<b>MILWAUKEE</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>267</b>	<b>.637</b>
Phoenix	374	327	.534
Portland	363	328	.525
Atlanta	359	330	.521
San Antonio	351	343	.506
Seattle	352	348	.503
Denver	351	349	.501

*Top 10 Regular Season and Playoff Records, 1979-80 through 1986-87*

Milwaukee never reached the NBA Finals during the 1980s, losing in the Eastern Conference Finals three times, more than any other challenger. The Bucks' best players during this stretch were shooting guard Sidney Moncrief, their first-round choice in 1979 who became a five-time All-Star, Marques Johnson at small forward, and Bridgeman off the bench. But the lack of a star center would haunt Nelson. Other than Bob Lanier's injury-plagued, three-plus years in the pivot, the Bucks employed a different primary starting center every year from 1975-76 through 1986-87, and there were plenty of moving parts.

SEASON	STARTER	BACKUPS	IN	OUT
1975-76	Elmore Smith	Jim Fox, Kevin Restani, Clyde Mayes	Smith (T Jun), Mayes (D)	Abdul-Jabbar (T Jun)
1976-77	Swen Nater	Scott Lloyd, Restani	Lloyd (D)	Smith (T Jan)
1977-78	John Gianelli	Kent Benson, Jim Eakins	Benson (D), Eakins (FA Jan)	Nater (T Jun), Restani (W Nov), Lloyd (W Dec)
1978-79	Kent Benson	Gianelli		Eakins (R)
1979-80	<b>Bob Lanier</b>	Harvey Catchings, Pat Cummings	Cummings (D <sup>10</sup> ), Catchings (T May), <b>Lanier (T Feb)</b>	Gianelli (T May), Benson (T Feb)
1980-81	<b>Bob Lanier</b>	Catchings, Cummings, Len Elmore	Elmore (FA Jun)	
1981-82	<b>Bob Lanier</b>	Catchings, Lister, Geoff Crompton	Lister (D), Crompton (T Sep)	Elmore (T Nov)
1982-83	<b>Bob Lanier</b>	Lister, Catchings, Dave Cowens, Paul Mokeski	Cowens (T Sep), Mokeski (FA Dec)	Cummings (T Jun), Crompton (W Sep)

1983-84	<b>Bob Lanier</b>	Lister, Catchings, Mokeski, Randy Breuer	Breuer (D)	Cowens (W Aug)
1984-85	Alton Lister	Mokeski, Breuer		<b>Lanier (R Sep)</b> , Catchings (T Sep)
1985-86	Randy Breuer	Lister, Mokeski		
1986-87	Jack Sikma	Breuer, Mokeski	Sikma (T Jul)	Lister (T Jul)

Legend: Starter/Backups columns reflect status at end of season/playoffs. In/Out columns include transactions during the summer prior to the season listed. D=Drafted, FA=Free Agent, R=Retired, T=Traded, W=Waived

### *Milwaukee Bucks' centers after the trade of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar*

Elmore Smith was Abdul-Jabbar's immediate successor, but he was known primarily as a defensive center; Smith had led the NBA in blocks during his last two years in Los Angeles, and would finish second – to Abdul-Jabbar – during his first season in Milwaukee. But by the time Nelson arrived the following season, there was a new center in town.

The Bucks had drafted Swen Nater in the first round in 1973 even though he had served as Bill Walton's backup at UCLA and had never been a starter. At the time, Costello claimed that Nater could play power forward next to Abdul-Jabbar, based mainly on Nater's 34-point, 23-rebound performance at the annual Pizza Hut All-Star Game in Las Vegas.<sup>11</sup> Embury was less enthused, stating after the draft that "we went for the best athlete available" (translation: we had to pick somebody).<sup>12</sup> The press immediately speculated that Nater might be dealt for a veteran power forward, while Nater feared that he would be stuck on the bench behind another UCLA legend. Since Nater had also been drafted by the ABA, he signed with the Virginia Squires a week later;<sup>13</sup> three years later, the collapse of the ABA allowed the Bucks to sign him.

Smith began the 1976-77 season as the starter, but Nater was playing significant minutes even before Nelson took over as head coach. By January 1977, Nelson had decided that Nater was better suited to his running offense, and traded Smith to Cleveland just before the deadline for a package that included the Cavaliers' first-round picks in 1977 and 1978.<sup>14</sup> The trade proved to be forgettable. Nater suffered a sprained left ankle after the deal was agreed to but before it was announced, hampering him on the court, and neither pick would turn into a significant player (Ernie Grunfeld and George Johnson).<sup>15</sup>

The Bucks finished out of the playoffs with a 32-50 record, then won a coin flip for the top pick in the 1977 draft. Once again, the top prospect was a center, and Milwaukee selected Kent Benson of the undefeated national champion Indiana Hoosiers. The Bucks also held picks 11 and 13, but Nelson wanted UCLA forward Marques Johnson and needed to move up to get him. So Nelson rolled the dice and traded Nater and the number 13 pick to the Buffalo Braves for the third pick. Johnson would make four All-Star teams and score over 10,000 points during his seven years in Milwaukee, but the deal left the Bucks thin in the middle. In September, Nelson traded a future first-rounder to Buffalo for John Gianelli, who would start 60 games for the Bucks in 1977-78 compared to just 22 by Benson as the latter struggled to adjust to the NBA. By January, Nelson had waived both of Nater's former backups (Scott Lloyd and Kevin Restani) and signed Jim Eakins, resulting in a complete turnover at the position in less than a calendar year. The Bucks returned to the playoffs, losing in the second round to the Nuggets in a seven games.

The revolving door in the middle would continue. Eakins retired after the Nuggets series, and the Bucks resigned Restani after power forward Dave Meyers went down with an injury. Benson and Gianelli were occasionally on the floor together, and each played in all 82 games during the regular season. Benson's play was improving, but he was splitting time with a career journeyman. In 1978-79, Benson started twice as many games (65) as Gianelli (31), but played just 75 minutes more than the veteran.

The Bucks missed the playoffs again in 1979, and were 29-27 at the All-Star break in 1980 despite the return of Meyers and the addition of Moncrief. Meanwhile, the Detroit Pistons were 14-40, a long way from being a contender, and had a 31-year-old center on their roster who was a seven-time All-Star but had failed to play more than 64 games in a season in five years due to knee troubles – and had missed six weeks this season with a broken hand. Still, Nelson thought Bob Lanier would put the Bucks over the top, and sent Benson and Milwaukee's 1980 first-round pick to Detroit for him on February 4, 1980.

"I think it enhances our chances for making the playoffs and doing well once we get there," Nelson said when the trade was announced, then compared Lanier to the player he had just shipped out of town. "He's [Lanier] able to play, as a matter of fact, a lot like Bennie [Benson]. He's able to play down low and he's able to play high, and we like our center to be able to play that way to open up the middle for Marques Johnson and Sidney Moncrief. I have a great deal of respect for Kent Benson and his future in the NBA."<sup>16</sup> The Bucks won their next six games, went 20-6 overall after the All-Star break, and won the Midwest Division with a 49-33 record. Lanier averaged just 28 minutes a game but remained productive, averaging 15.7 points and 6.9 rebounds a game. Veteran defensive specialist Harvey Catchings and rookie Pat Cummings provided able relief off the bench.<sup>17</sup> In the Western Semifinals, Milwaukee took a 3-2 lead against the defending champion Seattle SuperSonics before losing in seven games. The future looked bright.

The next season the Bucks moved to the Central Division in the Eastern Conference and won 60 games for the first time since 1973. All-Star Marques Johnson averaged 20 points a game for the third consecutive season, Bridgeman came off the bench to average 17, and Moncrief emerged as an offensive threat in his second year, nearly doubling his rookie scoring average while shooting 54 percent from the floor. Lanier missed 15 games, but his presence in the paint allowed Milwaukee to combat opposing centers like the Philadelphia 76ers' Darryl Dawkins. Against weaker foes, the Bucks' front line could be intimidating: Milwaukee set a team record with 18 blocks against Kent Benson's Pistons on November 11, 1980 (Catchings had 6, Lanier added 5).<sup>18</sup> The Bucks pushed the Sixers to seven games before losing in the conference semifinals for the second straight year.

For Milwaukee, the loss to Philadelphia would be the first of three consecutive playoff defeats at the hands of the 76ers, and four in five years. The Bucks avoided a similar fate in 1983-84 only because the Nets shocked the 76ers in a first-round upset (Boston then blew Milwaukee off the floor in five games, winning by margins of 23, 15, 9, and 7 points). Milwaukee continued to dominate the Central Division, and the development of Moncrief into a perennial All-Star and back-to-back Defensive Player of the Year, along with the continued steady play of Johnson and Bridgeman, put the Bucks on the short list of contenders every season. Yet playoff success eluded them.

Nelson had drafted 7-footer Alton Lister in 1981 as a potential successor to Lanier, but Lister was slow to develop, and Lanier's production continued to slide. In the fall of 1981 Nelson convinced former teammate Dave Cowens to come out of retirement to compete with Mickey Johnson at power forward (Dave Meyers had retired after the 1979-80 season). "We're taking a risk," Nelson said after acquiring Cowens (for point guard Quinn Buckner), "but I know what is inside the person. I know what makes him tick. And if anyone can come back after two years, it's Dave Cowens."<sup>19</sup> Cowens won the starting job, and Nelson's intention was to use Moncrief and Winters in the back court, with Johnson, Cowens, and Lanier up front. It sounded good on paper, but both Cowens and Lanier were turning 34 that fall, and Cowens' right knee had started bothering him during training camp.<sup>20</sup> Still, with Lister, Catchings, and Mickey Johnson also on the roster, the Bucks seemed flush with front court talent.

It took about a week for trouble to emerge. First, Catchings suffered a bruised knee and went on the injured list after the sixth game of the season. Then, with Winters suffering from back trouble, Nelson dispatched

Mickey Johnson to Kansas City for Phil Ford to start alongside Moncrief. Less than a week later, on November 16, Cowens went on the injured list with what was believed to be “a small tear of tissue above his right kneecap.”<sup>21</sup> During Cowens’ absence, Lanier missed five games with his own knee problem, forcing a healed Catchings to start in his place.

When Cowens returned on December 12, it was the first time since November 7 that Lanier, Lister, Cowens, and Catchings had all played in the same game, with Catchings starting in place of Cowens. It would also be the last time until January 25, because on November 8 the Bucks announced that Lanier had been suffering from a loose bone chip in his right knee and needed surgery.<sup>22</sup> Lanier’s goal was to get back on the court in time to ramp up before the playoffs. Catchings and Cowens would be the starters until Lanier returned, and free agent Paul Mokeski was signed on Christmas Eve to add depth. Lanier returned in late January, initially coming off the bench before making his first start on February 1. He would play in only 17 of the Bucks’ 35 remaining games while Lister remained a full-time starter. By the end of the month, Cowens was back on the injured list and his knee was in a cast. Despite the injuries, Nelson nursed the team to a 51-31 record and another division title.

	<b>Starts</b>	<b>Off bench</b>	<b>Total</b>
Lister	37	43	80
Lanier	35	4	39
Cowens	34	6	40
Catchings	33	41	74
Mokeski	1	49	50

*Milwaukee Bucks Primary Centers and Power Forwards, 1982-83 Regular Season*

Cowens sat out the playoffs, but his teammates played well enough to sweep the Celtics before falling to the 76ers in five games. That summer, Nelson drafted 7’3” Randy Breuer from Minnesota, and Cowens asked to be released after undergoing surgery. Lanier would play 72 games in 1983-84 as the Bucks won 50 games again, but the Bucks lost to the Celtics for another disappointing finish.

On September 17, 1984, Bob Lanier stepped down as President of the NBA Players Association; a week later, he retired from the Bucks.<sup>23</sup> Nelson reacted quickly, trading Junior Bridgeman, Marques Johnson, and Harvey Catchings to the Los Angeles Clippers for former Rookie of the Year Terry Cummings, Ricky Pierce, and Craig Hodges. The deal cost the Bucks two of their top three scorers (Johnson and Bridgeman) but Milwaukee got considerably younger. Pierce, who had just turned 25, was the oldest of the incoming trio; Johnson was 28, while Bridgeman and Catchings were in their 30’s. Money was also a factor, since the three new players were set to earn only \$650,000 combined; the three departing Bucks would make over \$1.5 million.<sup>24</sup> “When we had a chance to win the championship, Fitzy (owner Jim Fitzgerald) overextended our payroll,” Nelson said after the trade. “He’s been terrific in that area as long as we had a chance to win. Now we don’t feel we’re in that position with Lanier retiring. We gave it all we had. Now we’re in a different posture. So financially, it’s very difficult to ask an owner to overextend the payroll. We lost money last year, and the year before.”<sup>25</sup>

Still, Nelson hated to see his veterans departing: “I would have preferred keeping Junior here, but we couldn’t do that. He was an integral part of the deal – the Clippers insisted upon it. It was a difficult move to make, as a person as well as a coach. They are three of the classiest people I’ve ever been associated with.”<sup>26</sup> Cummings and Hodges would now start at power forward and guard, and Paul Pressey became the team’s starting “point forward.”<sup>27</sup> Lister – who had started at power forward the previous season – replaced Lanier at center.

The Bucks finished the 1984-85 season at 59-23, the third-best record in the league behind the Lakers and Celtics. But Lister broke his right wrist in the playoff opener against Chicago, and while he continued to play, his

shooting suffered.<sup>28</sup> The 76ers defeated the Bucks again, as Moses Malone averaged 25 points and nearly 10 rebounds a game during a four-game sweep in the Eastern Semifinals. “It’s hard to talk about anything positive after you’ve been swept, but I’ll probably look back at this season as one of my most enjoyable,” Nelson said after it was over. “The things we have accomplished this year have been amazing to me and I think to everybody else.”<sup>29</sup>

By the end of November 1985, Breuer had replaced Lister as the starting center, but just like Benson and Gianelli had done, the two split time evenly at the position.<sup>30</sup> The Bucks finally defeated the 76ers in the playoffs, winning a hard-fought seven-game series despite the absence of Moncrief for four games (including all three losses) due to a heel injury. But Milwaukee got swept – emphatically – by Boston in the Eastern Conference Finals.

Five weeks later, the Bucks rolled the dice on another trade for a veteran center, shipping Lister to the Seattle SuperSonics for Jack Sikma and an exchange of draft picks. Sikma had won a championship with Seattle in 1979, had been selected to seven consecutive All-Star Games until that streak was snapped in 1986, and had missed just 23 regular season games during his 9-year career. Nelson compared the trade to one he had made six years earlier, while acknowledging the quixotic nature of the Bucks’ title hopes. “We liken this very much to the Bob Lanier trade we made ... It keeps us within striking distance of the championship,” Nelson told reporters. “It gets us in a position that if somebody – Boston or one of the other strong teams in the East – *breaks down or lets down, we have the chance.*”<sup>31</sup>

Instead, it was Milwaukee who would break down during the 1986-87 season, as Nelson was forced to shuttle 22 different players through the Bucks locker room. In a twist, the front court was the most stable portion of the roster, as Sikma and Cummings were the only players to make it through the full 82-game regular season unscathed. Moncrief suffered a knee injury and played just 39 games; Pressey missed 21. Nelson attempted to shore up the back court in January by re-signing Junior Bridgeman, who had been traded by the Clippers to the Kings and then released the previous fall. Bridgeman, who had moved his family back to Louisville and was concentrating on his burgeoning business empire,<sup>32</sup> played 34 games for the Bucks, including four starts, averaging five points in 12 minutes a game before a knee injury ended his season.

The Bucks fell to third place in the Central, snapping a streak of seven straight division crowns, but with Moncrief back for the playoffs, Milwaukee went on a déjà vu tour against two aging foes. First, they beat a fading 76ers team in five games, then rallied from a 3-1 hole against the Celtics to force a seventh game. The Bucks led 113-111 with three minutes left in game seven, but Paul Pressey, who scored a team-high 28 points, then fouled out. The Celtics scored the final eight points of the game to win, 119-113. Boston’s injury-plagued front court of Larry Bird (back), Kevin McHale (broken right foot and assorted ankle/knee/wrist woes), and Robert Parish (sprained left ankle) combined to score 80 points and 44 rebounds. Once again, Milwaukee was overwhelmed on the glass in a big game, outrebounded 57-27 overall. “The rebounding game did us in,” Nelson said. “They totally dominated. I kept waiting for it to go our way, but it just didn’t. I guess they’re just superior to us in that aspect.”<sup>33</sup>

It was the end of an era. The Bucks would not play the 76ers in the playoffs again until 1991, nor the Celtics until 2018. In between, Milwaukee missed the playoffs seven years in a row (1992-1998) and from 1987 through 2018, the Bucks would only win their division once. It took them until 2021 to claim their second NBA championship.

Nine days after the loss to the Celtics in the 1987 Eastern Semifinals, Nelson resigned. Rumors of his departure had been circulating for a while. Herb Kohl, who had taken over as the Bucks majority owner in March 1985, was not happy that the Sikma trade had inflated the team’s payroll without delivering a championship, and was irked that Nelson’s top draft pick in 1986, Scott Skiles, missed most of the season with a back injury.<sup>34</sup> During the playoffs, Nelson was linked to both the New York Knicks and Dallas Mavericks, but he chose the Golden State

Warriors, who offered him the general manager job and a 10 percent stake in the franchise. His new boss was his old boss: Jim Fitzgerald, one of the principal owners of the Warriors.<sup>35</sup>

When Junior Bridgeman's number was retired, Nelson wasn't sure he would be welcomed back to Milwaukee, despite having reached an agreement with Herb Kohl on December 30, 1987 which freed him from a no-compete clause and allowed Nelson to eventually coach the Warriors.<sup>36</sup> "I felt strange about coming back," Nelson said two days after the ceremony. "I felt I shouldn't be there, that the Bucks didn't want me there. I didn't want to feel that way. But we got through it. Herb and I both had some nice things to add to Junior's day. I think it helped."<sup>37</sup> Nelson and Kohl also shook hands at center court, a gesture that no doubt was appreciated by Bridgeman.

In 2011, Bridgeman explained how playing for Nelson impacted his career: "I wanted to start. No one comes into the league saying I'd love to come in off the bench. Everyone wants to come in and be a starter. But it was easier with Nellie because that was the role he played [with the Celtics], so you never felt as if being sixth man was a lesser role or a lesser part of the team because he made it an important part of the team and what we did."<sup>38</sup>

Long after he retired, Sidney Moncrief summed up the legacy of the 1980's Bucks this way: "As good as we were, it goes to show you how good [the Celtics and 76ers] were. We were just not playing at the right time. If we could have moved forward or backwards, we might have been NBA champs. But not during that stretch."<sup>39</sup>

While Junior Bridgeman and his teammates never won a championship, he looked back fondly on his time in Milwaukee. "The thing that always comes to mind is that I was fortunate enough to play not just on great teams," Bridgeman said, "but with great people and guys that have remained friends over the years... When you played for the Bucks it wasn't like you were just playing basketball because they paid you. It was almost like high school where you were part of everything in the community. That made it special."<sup>40</sup>

Next Time: The 1982 NBA Finals

© 2022 Michael Hamel, MichaelHamel.net

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/>

---

<sup>1</sup> Dale Hofmann, "Injury may end Junior's career," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 31, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> "Bridgeman to be honored," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 4, 1987. The NBA did not officially track games started until the 1981-82 season, but the *2013-14 Milwaukee Bucks Media Guide* includes those figures for earlier seasons. According to those records, Bridgeman started 106 of the 711 games he played for Milwaukee, including 48 in 1976-77 (due to injuries to Dave Meyers and other players). His 711 games played was still first all-time for the Bucks as of the end of the 2019-20 season.

<sup>3</sup> Bud Lea, "Nellie is happy to come home," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 20, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Burt Graeff, "Beaten on boards," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, January 18, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Rel Bochat, "Costello Sure He'll Be Retained," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 17, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Meyers and UCLA had defeated Bridgeman and Louisville 75-74 in OT in the National Semifinals. The Bruins went on to win the NCAA Championship.

<sup>7</sup> Rel Bochat, "Bucks Had to Go For LA Package," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 17, 1975. Embry was also quoted as saying that the Knicks' offers were rejected because they included older players "and players of lesser talent."

<sup>8</sup> Wire story, "Bucks Undergo Change in Command," *Fond Du Lac (Wisconsin) Commonwealth Register*, November 23, 1976. New Bucks' president Jim Fitzgerald had been a minority owner until he led a group to take over majority ownership on November 4.

- 
- <sup>9</sup> Bud Lea, "Chance for a Turnabout," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 16, 1977.
- <sup>10</sup> Cummings was drafted in 1978 as a junior eligible; he returned to college for his senior year and joined the Bucks in 1979.
- <sup>11</sup> Rel Bochat, "Nater: Buck Forward or Trade Bait?" *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 25, 1973.
- <sup>12</sup> Rel Bochat, "Nater: Buck Forward or Trade Bait?"
- <sup>13</sup> Wire story, "Squires (Not Bucks) Sign Nater," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 2, 1973.
- <sup>14</sup> Cleveland then compounded their error by sending their 1979 first-rounder to the Bucks for Milwaukee's own 1978 first-round selection a week before the 1978 draft (the Bucks' own pick was three picks behind the Cavaliers' original selection). The 1979 draft pick turned into Sidney Moncrief.
- <sup>15</sup> Rel Bochat, "Nater Plans Quick Return," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 14, 1977.
- <sup>16</sup> Bob Richards, "Bucks Get Lanier for Title Push," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 5, 1980.
- <sup>17</sup> Catchings had been acquired in exchange for Gianelli and a future first round pick which the Bucks had originally acquired from the Indiana Pacers as compensation for the signing of future Hall of Famer Alex English. Natt turned into a dependable scorer for Portland and Denver. At the time of the trade, Nelson claimed that Catchings was "a better player than we could get at eight." Vic Feuerherd, "Bucks Trade for Catchings," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 1, 1979.
- <sup>18</sup> 2013-14 *Milwaukee Bucks Media Guide*, p128. Also see: <https://www.basketball-reference.com/boxscores/198011120DET.html>
- <sup>19</sup> Dale Hofmann, "Cowens Feels He Can Give Bucks a Boost," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 11, 1982.
- <sup>20</sup> Dale Hofmann, "Ailing Cowens is Placed on Injured List," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 17, 1982.
- <sup>21</sup> Dale Hofmann, "Ailing Cowens is Placed on Injured List."
- <sup>22</sup> Dale Hofmann, "Lanier to be Out 4 to 8 weeks," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 14, 1982.
- <sup>23</sup> Lanier was replaced by Junior Bridgeman. Bridgeman, the sixth president in the history of the NBA Players Association, was also the sixth consecutive president with ties to either the Bucks or the Celtics (Bob Cousy, Tom Heinsohn, Oscar Robertson, Paul Silas, then Lanier and Bridgeman). Robertson was a member of the Cincinnati Royals when he assumed the role in 1964, but joined the Bucks in 1970. Bridgeman remained in the role until 1988 and was replaced by Alex English, who had broken into the league with the Bucks in 1976.
- <sup>24</sup> Salaries for 1984-85: Cummings \$410,000, Pierce \$140,000, Hodges \$100,000; Johnson \$900,000, Bridgeman \$350,000, Catchings \$262,000. See: <https://www.basketball-reference.com/teams/MIL/1985.html> and <https://www.basketball-reference.com/teams/LAC/1985.html>.
- <sup>25</sup> Bud Lea, "Bucks set out on youth path," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 1, 1984.
- <sup>26</sup> Rel Bochat, "Nelson happy with big trade," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 1, 1984.
- <sup>27</sup> The term "point forward" was coined by Marques Johnson when he filled the role during the 1984 playoffs. Ray LeBov, "Meet Marques Johnson: From L.A. to Milwaukee and Back – Part 1," *The Basketball Writers*, <https://bballwriters.com/basketball-intelligence/meet-marques-johnson-from-l-a-to-milwaukee-everywhere-in-between-part-1/>, June 23, 2020, accessed July 2, 2020.
- <sup>28</sup> Rel Bochat, "76ers complete sweep of Bucks," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 6, 1985.
- <sup>29</sup> Dale Hofmann, "Bucks have come far, have a long way to go," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 6, 1985.
- <sup>30</sup> Lister ended up playing 20 minutes more than Breuer over the course of the regular season.
- <sup>31</sup> George Sauerberg, "Bucks get Sikma for Lister," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 2, 1986. Emphasis is mine. Sikma was less of an injury risk than Lanier, but Lister was arguably a better player than Benson, and one of the two first-round picks the Bucks surrendered was later used to select Mark Jackson, who had a very solid 16-year career in the NBA.
- <sup>32</sup> Bridgeman started investing in Wendy's franchises during his playing days, and by 2014 owned 195 of them. His company also began buying Chili's restaurants in 2005; by the time he decided to sell them in 2019, he owned 116. In 2016 *Forbes* listed Bridgeman as the fourth-highest-paid retired athlete in the United States, with an estimated income of \$32 million in 2015. Andrew Lawrence, "Junior Bridgeman: A different kind of franchise player," *Fortune*, July 7, 2014, accessed via <https://fortune.com/2014/07/07/junior-bridgeman-wendys/>. Peter Romeo, "Chili's Parent Agrees to Buy Back 116 Franchises," *Restaurant Business Online*, July 10, 2019, accessed via <https://www.restaurantbusinessonline.com/financing/chilis-parent-agrees-buy-back-116-franchises>. Rich Kirchen, "Junior Bridgeman fourth on Forbes retired jock pay list led by Michael Jordan," *Milwaukee Business Journal*, April 1, 2016.
- <sup>33</sup> Dale Hofmann, "Celtics end Bucks' magic," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 18, 1987.
- <sup>34</sup> Steve Bulpett, "Nelson to Knicks Move Possible," *Boston Herald*, May 3, 1987.
- <sup>35</sup> Dale Hofmann, "Nelson will be part-owner of Golden State Warriors," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 30, 1987.
- <sup>36</sup> Dale Hofmann, "Nellie had few options besides apology," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 31, 1987. The Warriors agreed to send the Bucks a 1988 second-round pick in exchange for getting Nelson out of his yet-to-expire contract with Milwaukee; Nelson took over as the Warriors head coach for the 1988-89 season.
- <sup>37</sup> Bud Lea, "Nellie is happy to come home," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 20, 1988.



---

<sup>38</sup> Tom Enlund, "Ex-Bucks star feeds off fond memories," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 16, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Todd Rosiak, "Back in town for an extended stay," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 16, 2012. Moncrief had rejoined the Bucks that season as an assistant coach.

<sup>40</sup> Tom Enlund, "Ex-Bucks star feeds off fond memories."