

# The San Diego Clippers: A Dream Ends

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With the departure of the San Diego Clippers National Basketball Association (NBA) team, San Diego's dream of being a part of the NBA abruptly ended. The San Diego Rockets had been sold to Houston in 1971.<sup>1</sup> When the ill-fated ABA team—The San Diego Conquistadors—failed in 1975, they were replaced with high hopes by the recently formed NBA expansion team, the Buffalo Braves, soon to become known as the San Diego Clippers.<sup>2</sup> San Diego basketball fans once again flocked to buy tickets to see famous NBA players in action. Within six years, local residents saw their dreams end once again, this time with little understanding of what took place to lose the team to Los Angeles.

Today's Clippers originated as the Buffalo Braves in 1970 as one of three expansion teams entering the NBA. The others were the Portland Trail Blazers and the Cleveland Cavaliers, leaving the Buffalo Braves with the need to prove themselves on the court and establish their team as a prominent franchise.<sup>3</sup> After a disappointing first few seasons, the Buffalo Braves were eventually able to take second place in the Atlantic conference by winning three of their seven playoff games.<sup>4</sup> By the end of their 1977-78 season, however, the Buffalo Braves' luck seemed to be wearing out as they finished the season in fourth place with a disappointing record of 27 wins and 55 losses.<sup>5</sup> Despite this poor showing on the court, the NBA sent a proposal to the Buffalo Braves owner, John Y. Brown giving him the opportunity to move his team to San Diego. He willingly agreed to this change of location. Though Brown agreed to the NBA's proposal, it was not part of the plan to go to San Diego himself. A side deal was made with the former Boston Celtics' owner Irv Levin, a California native, who jumped on the opportunity to own a team close to home since he was not happy in Boston.<sup>6</sup>

Under Levin, the Buffalo Braves moved to San Diego where they would soon become the San Diego Clippers. The team name Buffalo Braves referred to the history of Native Americans in Buffalo and did not fit well with San Diego's image. To come up with a team name that would represent San Diego, the Braves asked for the fans' participation. Levin organized a "Name the Team" contest that allowed fans to participate by sending in their potential team name ideas.<sup>7</sup> As a result of the contest, the franchise decided to call the team San Diego Clippers. Renowned for its active harbor and historic sailing ships, San Diego made the "Clippers" an

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*San Diego Clippers guard Randy Smith sets up for a long-range jumper. ©SDHS, UT 90:P3399 #29A-30, Union-Tribune Collection.*

appropriate choice for a team name.

Though Irv Levin was known as the owner of the San Diego Clippers, it is important to note that he was not alone in his dealings. Harold Lipton, a successful lawyer from New York, had worked with Irv Levin, the film producer, ever since their association in the National General Film Conglomerate.<sup>8</sup> After that, Levin and Lipton proceeded to assume ownership of the Seattle Superonics with Sam Schulman.<sup>9</sup> Levin and Lipton eventually gave up their Superonics ownership to purchase the Boston Celtics. From there, Levin and Lipton traded the Celtics for the Buffalo Braves, which became the San Diego Clippers, a team they owned from 1978 to 1981.

Upon the move to San Diego, the Clippers hired a new head coach, Gene Shue, who claimed he would generate an “exciting, fast break style of basketball.”<sup>10</sup> Randy Smith, the Clippers’ excellent guard, was enthusiastic to hear that Shue would be the new Clippers’ head coach. Smith commented that

Shue “was a very stylish person, he was always well-prepared and he’s a winner. I like those things in a coach.”<sup>11</sup> With Shue as the new head coach of the San Diego Clippers, the fans, the franchise and even Shue were confident about the team’s future. Levin was especially optimistic about the team under Shue’s coaching. He deduced that the Clippers would “come out roaring and smoking” and “put a winning team on the court from Day One.”<sup>12</sup> Shue shared a similar optimism, but nevertheless remained realistic as he recognized the Western Conference as a competitive division.<sup>13</sup>

Shue was correct; the Clippers division faced high-level competition with the Los Angeles Lakers, the Houston Rockets, and the San Antonio Spurs. Though finishing with an acceptable record of forty-three wins and thirty-nine losses, it was just enough to clench fifth place in the Pacific Division.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of their place in the conference, the Clippers were a new team; they had new management, new players, a new coach



*Gene Shue, left, acquires all-star center Bill Walton May 13, 1979. ©SDHS, UT 90:P6577 #14, Union-Tribune Collection.*

and even a new name. It is remarkable that they finished as well as they did. While one may call this first season lucky, the Clippers would soon realize that their luck had already run out.

The Clippers 1979-80 season produced less than satisfactory results, but they still managed to clinch another fifth place finish in their division.<sup>15</sup> Their thirty-five wins and forty-seven losses displayed that the team was falling behind while Shue and Levin saw their hopes of bringing a winning team to San Diego becoming dim.<sup>16</sup> Though the Clippers record speaks for itself, there were some unforeseen circumstances that contributed to their less successful 1979-1980 season. First, their newly acquired "big man," Bill Walton, a San Diego native, played only 14 of the teams 82 games.<sup>17</sup> As a part of their deal to obtain Walton from the Portland Trailblazers, the Clippers traded Kermit Washington, an all-star defender, Kevin Kunnert, a solid center, and a first-round draft pick.<sup>18</sup> It was frustrating from Shue's perspective as he said, "In one day I could get good news, then bad news, and this would happen almost daily."<sup>19</sup>

After acquiring Walton, the Clippers had great success in their preseason exhibition games, beating teams such as the Los Angeles Lakers, who at the time had Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Magic Johnson. After their victory over the Lakers however, Walton found out on the following day that he had sustained another stress fracture in his foot. Walton remarked, "I am the most injured athlete ever."<sup>20</sup> He also recalled that it was "frustrating, disappointing and psychologically devastating because they couldn't find out what was wrong with my feet."<sup>21</sup> Shue argued that this was one of the toughest seasons he had ever coached, but explained that in the following season "this club will be starting over."<sup>22</sup>



Bill Walton establishes position as a Portland Trailblazer. Courtesy of Bill Walton.



Bill Walton makes use of a therapeutic whirlpool. ©SDHS, UT 90:Q0021 #14, Union-Tribune Collection.

## The Donald Sterling Era

Shue's contract would not be renewed for the 1980-81 season and the Clippers hired new head coach, Paul Silas. This would not be the only change the team would see. After missing the playoffs for the third consecutive season in



*San Diego Clippers guard Lloyd Free extends for a one-handed dunk. ©SDHS, UT 90:P3399 #16A-17, Union-Tribune Collection.*

San Diego, the Clippers owners, Levin and Lipton, decided to sell the team to Donald Sterling for a reported \$13.5 million dollars in May 1981.<sup>23</sup> This change of ownership would become official after the NBA Board of Governors approved the purchase in late May 1981.<sup>24</sup> The acquisition was surprising since the San Diego Clippers finished their 1980-81 season with a record of 36 wins and 46 losses.<sup>25</sup> Regardless, Sterling seemed adamant about acquiring the Clippers, whether they were losing or not.

At the time he acquired the Clippers, Donald Sterling was a successful lawyer and real estate mogul who resided in Malibu.<sup>26</sup> Though initially skeptical of announcing his worth, Sterling eventually gave in. He thought that fans would feel as though they could not identify with him, but former owner Levin eventually convinced him that by identifying his worth, San Diegans could see

that Sterling had the potential to bring a great team to San Diego.<sup>27</sup> Donald Sterling did just that by saying, "You can say that I have substantial assets. Very substantial."<sup>28</sup> He then promised San Diego a great team, as he put it, "We are going after box office names. Whatever a winning team costs, we are prepared to pay. If an average player costs \$300,000 and an above average player costs \$600,000, we'll pay it. We think we owe that much to the fans."<sup>29</sup> *Union-Tribune* sports reporter Nick Canepa commented "Everyone was optimistic when he took over."<sup>30</sup> Sterling made the fans and franchise fully aware that he was committed to making the San Diego Clippers a successful team on the court.<sup>31</sup>

Though his words of assurance and encouragement sounded promising, the San Diego Clippers would have their worst season to date, winning only 17 games while losing 65.<sup>32</sup> While Sterling claimed that he was willing to spend "unlimited sums to buy new talent for the Clippers," it became clear that he was not upholding his end of the bargain.<sup>33</sup> Despite the fact that former coach Shue had previously mentioned that the franchise was in need of a forward, Sterling prevented a deal from happening with Denver for a great forward, Alex English.<sup>34</sup> An owner with enough funds to put together a great team and enough arrogance to talk about it should have certainly signed a player that would greatly contribute to the franchises success.

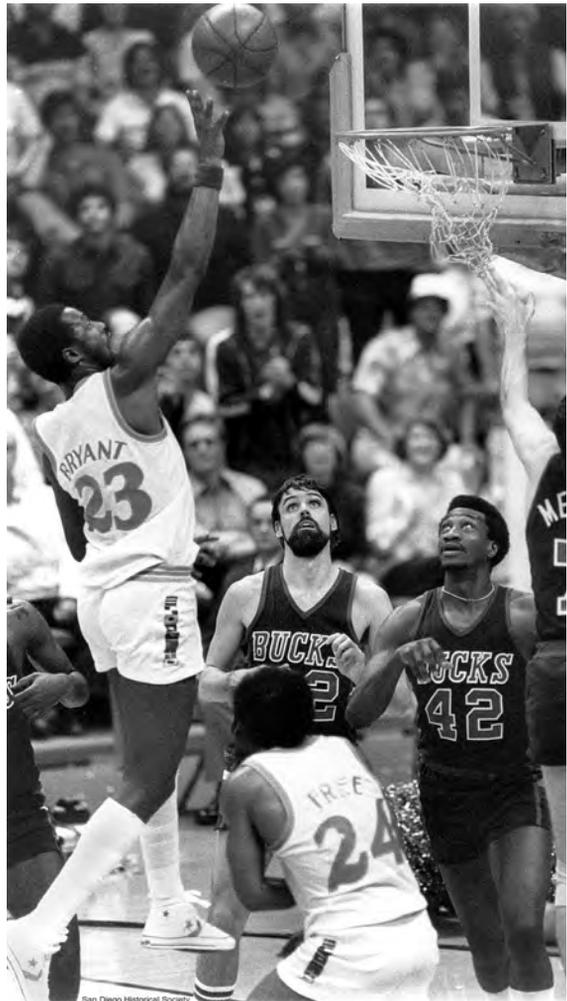
Although Sterling's deals, or lack there of, were certainly contributing factors to the failure of the San Diego Clippers in the 1981-82 season, they were not the sole reason for the team's disappointing season. Unfortunately, lingering foot

problems benched all-star center, Bill Walton, for the entire season. Walton said, "You never blame the ownership. The fact that it didn't work is my fault because if I had played, if I had been able to play, it would have worked."<sup>35</sup> Another contributing factor to the unsuccessful 1981-82 season was the attendance average. Since the Clippers started playing basketball in San Diego, their average attendance decreased from 9,230 to 5,477 people per game.<sup>36</sup> Realizing this apparent failure in the 1981-82 season, Sterling sought to finish the season in last place so they could pick up Ralph Sampson in the upcoming draft.<sup>37</sup> The NBA, however, found this sort of talk to compromise the NBA's integrity and Sterling was fined \$10,000.<sup>38</sup> It was as if "he didn't want or care if the team succeeded" in San Diego.<sup>39</sup>

Just as people began to wonder about Sterling's antics with regard to the Clippers and question whether or not he was fully dedicated to the franchise, Sterling tried to move the team to Los Angeles during the summer before the 1982-83 season.<sup>40</sup> This act caused a tremendous uproar on behalf of the NBA as they proceeded to investigate Sterling and his commitment to his team.<sup>41</sup> Club documents with Sterling's intentions of "cutting back" on the spending for the franchise certainly did not help his cause. Key items to a franchise, such as training camp, scouting, advertising, and medical expenses went from suitable in the 1981-82 season to the bare minimum in the 1982-83 season.<sup>42</sup>

It seemed as though everything was reduced in some way, but certain areas were affected more than others. For example, in the 1982-83 season Sterling arranged for the team to train at North Island Naval Air Station in order to further cut spending, a thought that seemed unimaginable when Sterling first acquired the team.<sup>43</sup> Also, when Sterling cut back scouting from \$23,402 to \$1,100, there was an incalculable risk in future drafts.<sup>44</sup> The Clippers had been on the right track with their scouting as they drafted the number one draft pick, Tom Chambers, the previous year.<sup>45</sup> Chambers would go on to be an all-star.

The NBA had ways of dealing with Sterling's conduct. "If one



San Diego Clippers forward Joe Bryant glides over the Milwaukee Bucks defense. ©SDHS, UT 90:Q3695 #19, Union-Tribune Collection.

of our clubs begins to operate in a manner that is detrimental to the NBA as a whole... the board of governors under the constitution has power to impose any number of sanctions."<sup>46</sup> These sanctions include anything from as little as a fine to something as extreme as "termination of a franchise."<sup>47</sup> Luckily for Sterling, the investigation came to an end when he hired an attorney, Alan Rothenberg, to handle matters pertaining to the Clippers.<sup>48</sup> This inquiry on behalf of the NBA also halted as a result of Sterling's assurance to the NBA that he was set on staying in San Diego with the team.<sup>49</sup>

The San Diego Clippers 1983-84 season was met with a new coach, Jimmy Lynam, who replaced Paul Silas.<sup>50</sup> The Clippers went through a number of coaches, but "that's the nature of pro sports... if you don't win, the players get traded and the coaches get fired."<sup>51</sup> The Clippers did just that. They finished the season with 30 wins and 52 losses and traded away Swen Nater and Byron Scott, two very promising players.<sup>52</sup> Within the Clippers 30 wins, only 5 were road game wins.<sup>53</sup> Donald Sterling had had enough.

Upon finishing the 1983-84 season, it was apparent that Sterling once again had his eyes fixed on Los Angeles. He announced at a press conference on May 15, 1984, that he would be moving the Clippers to Los Angeles.<sup>54</sup> Though many of the fans were surely disgruntled by this decision, it was nevertheless a good business opportunity. Marketing and Sales Senior Vice President Carl Lahr agreed that "[I]t was the right move to relocate to Los Angeles. I don't think there was any way to turn around the team's image and fortunes unless the team was sold and a new arena was built."<sup>55</sup> Bill Walton also pointed out:

For him it was the right decision, and it's his team. He is from Los Angeles, his businesses are in Los Angeles and it has worked out for him. Professional basketball is a business. While people like me might have certain feelings, it is the businessmen who make the call. When you look at the history of the NBA and you look at the incredibly great players, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, Kareem, Michael Jordan, Dr. J, all the phenomenal number of players who have made the league what it is, never discount what David Stern (current NBA commissioner) has done. You have to have that business leader at the top making the right decisions. From a business point of view, it was the right move.<sup>56</sup>



*Bill Walton contests a shot from Hall of Famer Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Courtesy of Bill Walton.*

Although the Clippers' time in San Diego was short-lived, it will not be forgotten for what it was and what San Diego could have been, a great basketball town. The Clippers were not the first NBA team from San Diego since the popular Rockets had made San Diego their hometown prior to moving to Houston. San Diegans still hope that they have not had the last professional basketball team to play in their hometown; San Diego has much to offer basketball fans – everything but financial support and an NBA team.

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