

SLUCK WATTS: DAVID ESKENAZI COLLECTION

BY HILLEL KUTTLE

FILL THE VOID

**SONICS FANS HOPE THAT THE NHL'S
ARRIVAL AT KEYARENA MEANS A
FUTURE FOR THE NBA. BUT ARE THEIR
DREAMS ON ICE?**



ILLUSTRATION BY NEOMI RAPOPORT

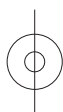


AN ENCOUNTER WITH TWO SEATTLE SUPERSONICS PLAYERS IN THE late 1970s remains embedded in Lindsey Schwartz's mind. Schwartz was about 8 years old and hanging out at The Butcher, his family's restaurant in Bellevue. Many Sonics lived nearby and ate there. On this night, guard Dennis Johnson and forward John Johnson dined together. Schwartz requested their signatures. "They said it's not polite to ask someone for an autograph while they're eating," Schwartz says. He laughs, then turns serious. "They were trying to teach a young kid some manners." When the men finished their meal, Schwartz snagged the coveted autographs. Four decades later, Schwartz, who took over the family restaurant business, still relishes this memory.

Such snapshots in time have comforted Schwartz and other National Basketball Association fans since the Sonics were sent to Oklahoma City after the 2007-08 season. "It broke my heart," Schwartz says of the move. "I was super angry. I still am."

Many Sonics fans share this pain, even though Seattle's professional sports scene is plenty dynamic with the Sounders, the Mariners, the Storm, and the Seahawks. And it's getting better. In October 2021, the city's National Hockey League expansion team will take the ice — nearly a century after the Seattle Metropolitans folded in 1924. That'll make five Seattle franchises in the country's six top leagues.

Only one league is missing, and it's one that fans ache to bring back: the NBA.



AMERICAN JEWS HAVE A long history of sports superfandom and sports team ownership, and Seattle's community is no exception. Herman Sarkowsky founded the Seahawks, Jeff Smulyan purchased the Mariners, and Adrian Hanauer is a majority owner of the Sounders and a minority owner of the coming NHL team.

The numbers jump when it comes to basketball. Jewish individuals own several NBA teams, and the present and immediate past commissioners are Jewish. Businessman Sam Schulman founded the SuperSonics in 1966. And it was Starbucks founder and former CEO Howard Schultz (who, incidentally, bought pastries from Schwartz's family bakery for his nascent coffee shop chain) who landed responsibility for letting the team go in 2008.

Solicit Sonics superfans for their strongest associations, and they mention two things.

First, the names of their favorite players: Spencer Haywood. Lenny Wilkens. Downtown Freddie Brown. Jack Sikma. Gus Williams. Ray Allen. Dale Ellis. Tom Chambers. Gary Payton and Shawn Kemp — always stated together. The

Johnsons — ditto. Xavier McDaniel. Nate McMillan. Detlef Schrempf. Gerald Henderson. Clemon Johnson. Lonnie Shelton. Paul Silas.

Second, the glory days: the three-time NBA finalists of the late '70s and mid '90s and, naturally, the 1978-79 championship team.

Renton-native Daniel Shapiro started his basketball career as a ball boy for the Sonics, a job procured through his family friend, center-forward Michael Cage. He went on to become a strength and conditioning coach for them, the Sacramento Kings, and, now, the Los Angeles Clippers. "I'd love the opportunity to go home to play games," he says.

Shapiro remembers attending Sonics games with his friend Jason D'Ambrosio. Jason's dad Jerry drove the boys to the Seattle Center Coliseum for games, returned to his office three blocks away, finished work, and picked them up afterward. Shapiro recalls witnessing a spectacular dunk by Xavier McDaniel — and isn't that adjective redundant? — he and Jason standing on their seats, crossing their arms at face level in a tribute to the X-Man.

Jerry D'Ambrosio watched a telecast of the 2018 exhibition game

"It was bittersweet to see Durant return to light it up at the Key, leaving many to wonder what might have been."

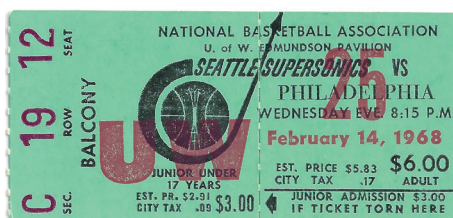
between the Golden State Warriors and the Kings at a sold-out KeyArena. Warriors forward Kevin Durant electrified the crowd by addressing them before the game wearing Kemp's Sonics No. 40 jersey.

Durant, of course, had been drafted first overall by the Sonics in 2007. He earned the NBA's Rookie of the Year award on a 20-win team. With the fourth overall pick in 2008, the Sonics drafted Russell Westbrook. Good times lay ahead. But before KD and Russ could take the court together, the Sonics were gone. Eleven years later, emotions ran high at Durant's reappearance. "It was bittersweet to see Durant

return to light it up at the Key, leaving many to wonder what might have been," D'Ambrosio says.



FEW LOCALS HAVE forgotten or forgiven those responsible for the sale. One fan, David Eskenazi, held season tickets for the last decade and a half of the Sonics' existence. After the team bolted, it would be five years before he watched another NBA game even on television.



HOOP DREAMS Clockwise from top left: Lenny Wilkens driving on Al Attles; Dennis Johnson with his 1979 Finals MVP trophy; a Sunbeam Bread trading card; a 1968 ticket



CHAMPS
Left: Shawn Kemp rookie card; right: former players and civic leaders at the Seattle Sports Star of the Year Banquet in 2019, 40 years after the 1979 championship

"I was angry, really upset," says Eskenazi, who owns a financial services firm in downtown Seattle. "I have ire directed at all parties involved."

Former Sonics point guard Slick Watts, who lives in Redmond, was hurt and disappointed by the Sonics' move. By allowing the Sonics to uproot from a supportive market, and then preventing the sale of the Sacramento Kings five years later to Seattle financier Chris Hanson, who would have relocated the team here, the NBA's then-commissioner David Stern "betrayed us," Watts says.

In his own way, Watts is lobbying for a correction.

Every Wednesday, he runs into retired Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer at Bellevue's PRO Club. Ballmer could have been yet another

Jewish owner of a Seattle team. He had sought to purchase the Sonics in 2008 and was part of Hanson's unsuccessful 2013 group before buying the Clippers in 2014.

Watts likes to prod Ballmer to move his team to Seattle. "Steve, I'm still waiting on the Clippers," Watts says. Ballmer's usual response, he notes, is to let out a cackle.

Wednesdays are when Watts dons his old Sonics jersey, its green and yellow and No. 13 still vibrant. Sometimes, Watts wears his Sonics warm-up suit on top; other times, it might be the jacket the Sonics awarded him as one of their top 40 players during a 40th anniversary celebration in 2007.

Dressing in the garb, Watts says, is cathartic for him and for fans.

"It's to let people know to keep hope alive," he explains.



WHETHER EMPLOYING fantasy or reason, many Sonics lovers express confidence in the wrong being righted. They look to the NHL's return — 97 years later — as a potential indicator for the NBA's rebound.

Their thought process runs like this: The NHL team's imminent arrival, the under-reconstruction KeyArena, and Seattle's booming economy are sure to entice an expansion team or the relocation of an existing team.

If the NHL's success at the box office is any indication, the NBA's re-establishment in Seattle would break the internet. Thirty-two thousand seat deposits were placed in the first 24 hours of NHL business, and 37,000 more names sit on a waiting list, says Bill Chapin, NHL Seattle's senior vice president of sales.

With the WNBA's Storm due to share the arena, "we'll be very ready for basketball," he says.

Seattle-based ownership groups for a men's hoops club, including Hanson's, continue bidding to land the Holy Grail of an NBA team. Their strategy includes summoning the glorious past through such partners as Payton, a Hall of Famer and

the point guard for the Sonics' 1995-96 finalist team, and Wally Walker, a forward for the 1978-79 champions and later a Sonics executive.

Their efforts may be for naught, at least in the near term. Every so often, Shapiro picks up scuttlebutt that the New Orleans Pelicans or the Memphis Grizzlies or others are candidates to relocate to Seattle.

He's cautious about the rumblings. "For the last five years, I've been hearing that Seattle will get a team five years from now. Here we are five years later, and nothing's happened," Shapiro says.

At a sports conference last December, NBA commissioner Adam Silver said, regarding Seattle: "There's, I think, a special fondness for that market, but nothing is being actively discussed at this time."

"Seattle will be sure that if they get a team, they won't lose it this time," Shapiro says of NBA potential. "I have strong faith in my hometown that they would exceed all expectations."

Lindsey Schwartz is keen to do his part. He and his friends are buying a season-ticket package for the NHL team, with Schwartz's allotment being eight games each season. He's excited to learn about hockey.

And if the NHL's presence in Seattle opens the door to the NBA's return, so much the better. Says Schwartz: "I think it'll happen." ♦

If the NHL's success at the box office is any indication, the NBA's re-establishment in Seattle would break the internet.