

Royals Revisited

Cincinnati's NBA experience ran fifteen seasons

By Gerry Schultz

The National Basketball Association, the multi-billion dollar enterprise that now draws interest on a global scale, has started its 2008-09 season. One of its top teams is the 14-3 Cleveland Cavaliers, led by media sensation LeBron James. Hopes are high for the league, the team and the player this year once again.

But it hasn't always been this way. Before the Cavaliers were born nearly 40 years ago, Ohio's first NBA team strode the hardwoods. They were the Cincinnati Royals, and they spent the bulk of their existence in a league of 8-10 clubs, and much tougher conditions than the NBA many know today.

In fact, the NBA of the 1960s was a league which was still proving itself at a time when television itself was arriving, many miles away still from cable and internet.

Ask today's basketball fan what he knows about the Cincinnati Royals. He might say that they had Oscar Robertson for a number of years, but were never winners, and then eventually limped out of town somewhere. That's if he can recall them at all, and some cannot in 2008.

That's because the Cincinnati version of the franchise, known today as the Sacramento Kings, played their last home game in the Spring of 1972. That's more than 35 years ago. A whole generation of America has arrived since then. The world is now a completely different place.

But what basketball fans should know is that the Cincinnati Royals were an important stepping stone in the climb of success that became today's NBA. The team was part of a cutting edge time in America. They also were, in some ways, a very unique team, with some singular events in their history.

Oh yeah --- and they were actually damn good for several years. In fact, they nearly defeated Boston for the NBA championship in the mid-1960s on three different occasions.

The Cincinnati NBA story goes back all the way to 1956, over half a century ago. The league was struggling to survive with just eight teams, and was looking to establish itself in major markets with major league arenas. It's hard to believe today's 30-team NBA powerhouse was ever in that state, but it certainly was then.

Les Harrison's Rochester Royals had been world champions, but were now losing money every year. Cincinnati had the Gardens arena, then a coveted complex. It had a rabid college basketball fan base, much like it does now.

It had the baseball Reds to prove the city sports-legit. NBA President Maury Podoloff encouraged Les and his brother Jack to move the team to the Queen City in the spring of 1957, and they did.

The first season started well, with three future Hall of Famers leading the way. But injuries and other vacancies did the team in. Star Maurice Stokes, an early NBA legend, then suffered a permanent injury that left him hospitalized the rest of his days. The team nearly folded after that one first NBA season.

Local buyers instead bought the club, and scorer Jack Twyman kept the team barely afloat for two years as the team reconfigured its roster. Several key players had left the team after the Stokes injury. It was a situation unlike any in NBA history.

Twyman also impressed by leading the cause for the fallen Stokes and his medical bills, a legendary fact. How many NBA teams held their own annual charity game ?

Fortunately, Cincinnati did have the rights to college phenom Oscar Robertson, who, even today, is rated by some to be the greatest player in the history of the game. The early 1960s saw the team build around the young star, even as they briefly contended with a rival league. The new American Basketball League signed away two Cincinnati number one draft picks and a few reserve players in its brief two-season run. It was around just long

enough to slow the Royals down.

In 1963, Robertson led a solid squad deep into the playoffs, upsetting favored Syracuse and setting up a seven-game grudge match with the hollowed champion Boston Celtics. With a huge upset in the making, and the Celtics on the ropes, Cincinnati team president Thomas Woods suddenly passed away. During the ensuing ownership struggle for control of the team, Gardens arena head Louis Jacobs had scheduled a circus for the facility for the week of what would become the Boston playoff series. He had not expected the Royals to beat Syracuse! Some today still believe that upheaval cost the Royals a title.

The following season, one ABL signee, the coveted Jerry Lucas, finally joined the team. Lucas was a great player with strong local connections and was easily the most famous Ohio basketball player yet. Teaming with Robertson and Co., with NBA vet Jack McMahon now also adding to the cause as coach, Lucas and the Royals soared to the NBA's second-best record, harrasing the Celtics all season long in what became the NBA's top rivalry.

Robertson was later named the NBA's Most Valuable Player that season for his stellar all-around play. Lucas earned Rookie Of The Year honors as well to secure a rare double-award feat for Cincinnati.

Unfortunately, injuries did the team in in the playoffs against Boston. Team VP Tom Grace had also surprised in trading away key player Bob Boozer during the year. His absence was notable during those playoffs. Critics again claimed that ownership had cost the team a NBA title.

In November, 1964, another key player, defender Bucky Bockhorn, suddenly was lost to a career-ending injury. Were the Cincinnati Royals star-crossed? The team had a tremendous 1965 draft class, but two of the youngsters were too sick or injured to play a single game that season.

The 1965-66 season proved to be the team's best. The team had the league's best record heading into February, and had hosted a notable NBA All-Star Game at Cincinnati Gardens in January. Robertson, Lucas, and little-known Adrian Smith took turns being named Most Valuable Player of the event, 1964-1966. All were Cincinnati Royals.

In the 1966 playoff against Boston, the Royals again had them one game from elimination for two games, pushing the great Celtics to the very limit.

But Boston's Red Auerbach somehow smoked the last cigar.

The Royals had two First Team All-NBA players in Robertson and Lucas, and boasted the best shooting-passing offense in the league during those years. But legendary centers Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain led historic opposing teams that were just a little better. Only the very best could beat Cincinnati when it mattered.

As the late 1960s arrived, the Royals were key in developing franchises in other cities with their visits, including Cleveland and Kansas City. That's because owner Louis Jacobs and his Emprise concessions company were more interested in arenas and selling popcorn, among other things, than in reloading a Royals team that had lost key players to retirement. Ed Jucker, the Cincinnati Bearcats coaching legend, led the Royals during this stretch, but to no avail. The former contenders sank.

In 1969, general manager Joe Axelson, who Oscar Robertson said " didn't know a basketball from a pumpkin ", and coach Bob Cousy, who disliked the city, were hired to take over things. Axelson showed horrendous trading skills, often gutting Cousy's best efforts. But then, the 41-year-old coach had tried to play himself also, to equally bad results. As the 1970s arrived, the Cincinnati Royals had become a joke. Axelson was also part of the new ownership that bought the team and moved the club to Kansas City in 1972. Loyalty to fans was never his strong suit.

It is an interesting story, with a bad ending, sure. But during their time in the NBA, a league they had helped greatly, the number of teams had more than doubled, television revenue was streaming in, and professional basketball had become a success story.

The NBA badly needed Cincinnati in 1957, and does not now. That is a key fact which is retold every several years when inquiries are made about the league ever returning to the Queen City. The 1960s are long gone, along with the five-dollar courtside tickets to see Robertson and Lucas, and their legendary opponents of the day.

Today's basketball theater productions, with its laser shows, dance teams and tumbling mascots are the, uh, progress since then. The deafening music is the flow of dollars into league coffers. There still is a game there, but it is decades removed from Cincinnati.

If the NBA does ever make its return to the Queen

City --- I'm fine with good college ball for now --- it will be with some mention of the NBA predecessors that came to Cincinnati before them. Those Royals were regal, and did the league, the game and their time very well. Cincinnati should never forget them.

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