

HISTORY LESSON

BY GLENN RIFKIN

The NBA's Long-Forgotten Team

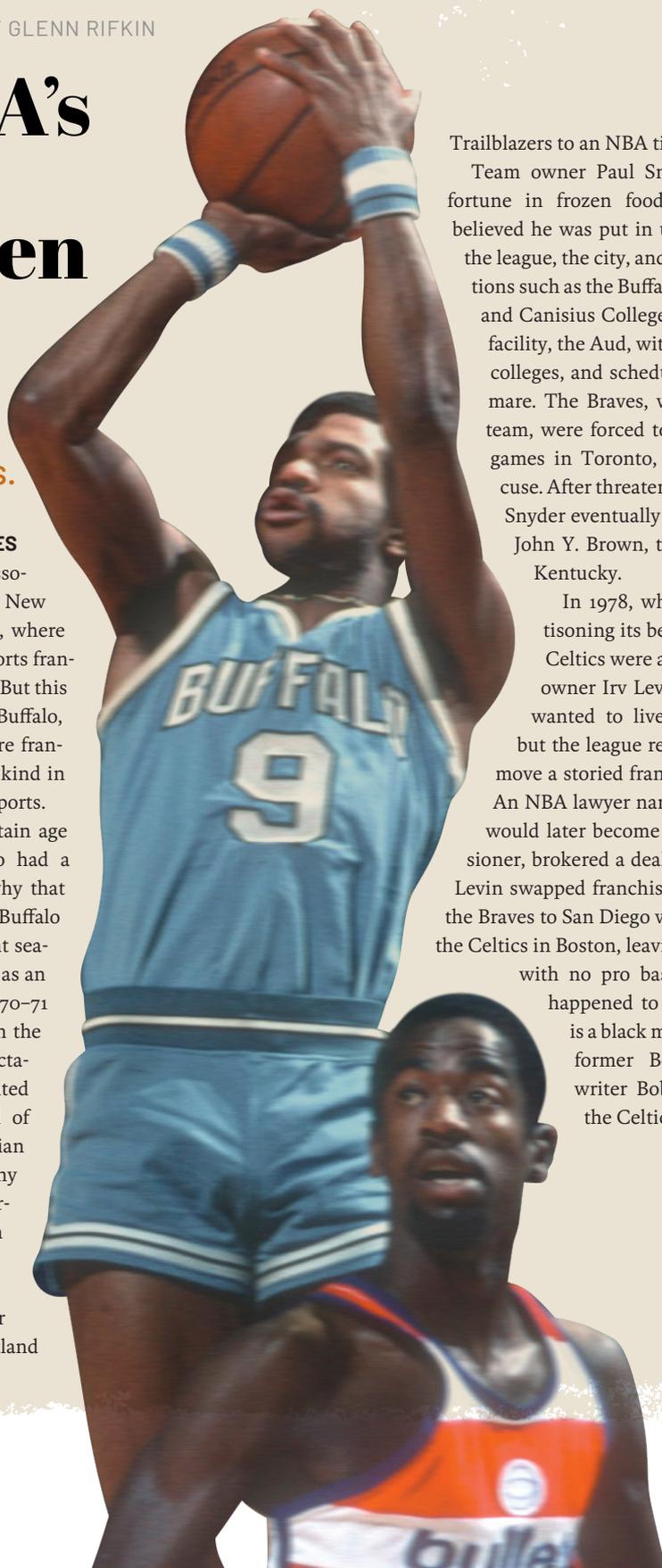
A one-of-a-kind deal ended the Buffalo Braves.

IN 1978, THE BUFFALO BRAVES

of the National Basketball Association departed from western New York and landed in San Diego, where they became the Clippers. A sports franchise relocating is not unusual. But this move, which jilted the fans in Buffalo, was the culmination of a bizarre franchise swap, the only one of its kind in the history of US professional sports.

Most NBA fans under a certain age don't even know that Buffalo had a team, and even fewer know why that team fled from the city. But Buffalo did indeed have a team for eight seasons, which entered the league as an expansion team during the 1970-71 season. Its short-lived tenure in the city was marked by great expectations; but a raft of highly talented players, including future Hall of Famers Bob McAdoo and Adrian Dantley, were among the many team stars who were summarily shipped out of town in an endless series of trades. Even their one-time coach Jack Ramsey was a Hall of Famer who quit and later led the Portland

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Trailblazers to an NBA title.

Team owner Paul Snyder, who made his fortune in frozen foods and theme parks, believed he was put in untenable position by the league, the city, and rival sports organizations such as the Buffalo Sabres hockey team and Canisius College. The team shared its facility, the Aud, with the Sabres and local colleges, and scheduling became a nightmare. The Braves, who became a playoff team, were forced to play several "home" games in Toronto, Rochester, and Syracuse. After threatening to move the team, Snyder eventually gave up and sold it to John Y. Brown, the future governor of Kentucky.

In 1978, while the team was jettisoning its best players, the Boston Celtics were also struggling. Celtics owner Irv Levin, a movie producer, wanted to live on the West Coast but the league refused to allow him to move a storied franchise like the Celtics. An NBA lawyer named David Stern, who would later become the league's commissioner, brokered a deal in which Brown and Levin swapped franchises. Levin then moved the Braves to San Diego while Brown took over the Celtics in Boston, leaving proud Buffalo fans with no pro basketball team. "What happened to the Buffalo franchise is a black mark on the NBA," says former Boston Globe sports-writer Bob Ryan, who covered the Celtics. ▀

Randy Smith of the Buffalo Braves shoots against the Washington Bullets during an NBA game circa 1977.