

“You’re in the South Now, Brother”: The Atlanta Hawks and Race, 1968–1970

BY

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Among the players trickling into Atlanta in the summer of 1968 following the arrival of the first NBA team to the Deep South, the former St. Louis Hawks, was “Pogo” Joe Caldwell, one of the team’s stars. In 1968, the Hawks, a perennial league power, had been regular-season champion of the league’s Western Division. Caldwell was an all-star, a former standout at Arizona State who played on the 1964 United States gold-medal-winning Olympic team. Caldwell, his wife, daughters, and sister arrived at the Holiday Inn in Atlanta, only to be greeted by a car full of whites who screamed “Hey, niggers!” before driving away. “Well,” his sister told him, “you’re in the South now, brother.”¹

Professional sports had already arrived in Atlanta and the Deep South when the Hawks began playing at Georgia Tech’s Alexander Memorial Coliseum in October 1968. The move of the Milwaukee Braves to Atlanta, the impact of their black star, Hank Aaron, and the country’s poetic and fraught historical relationship with baseball and its role in race relations are generally interpreted as paving the way for first the National Football League and then the NBA. This interpretation is instructive

¹Joe Caldwell, *Banned from Basketball: The Long Strange Trip of “Pogo” Joe Caldwell* (Tempe, AZ, 2003). Caldwell’s book is self-published and not paginated. This account, when citing Caldwell’s book, will note the chapters from which the material is taken. This particular material comes from chapters 4 and 7.

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and, in a broad sense, true. What it ignores, however, are the different racial identities associated with different professional sports. “Basketball was originally invented as a white man’s game,” notes the philosopher and diplomat Michael Novak, but in post-World War II culture, its “mythos became more than urban. It became in a symbolic and ritual way uniquely black.” Such was the result of its sophistication, its flashy showmanship, and its association with urban cityscapes. “Basketball,” Novak continues, “although neither invented by blacks nor played only by blacks, came to allow the mythic world of the black experience to enter directly, with minimal change, into American life.”²

Baseball and football had black and white athletes, but both were identified as “white games.” Both baseball and football featured position differences and assumptions about intelligence that allowed fans to maintain their racial prejudices and still identify with teams featuring black players; for example, in football quarterbacks were always white. Basketball, by contrast, was a “black game,” and no professional sport was as associated with blackness as was the National Basketball Association. Accordingly, its move into the Deep South was racially significant. Even though the move was largely spurred by Sunbelt business imperatives that drove similar changes across the landscape of professional sports—the desire to gentrify city centers, bring in new business through deregulation and low taxes, and use athletics to signal sustainability to the rest of the country—race

²Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: End Zones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit* (New York, 1976), 101, 105. There are several strong works that deal successfully with the blackness of professional basketball. See Todd Boyd, “The Day the Niggaz Took Over: Basketball, Commodity Culture, and Black Masculinity,” in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity*, eds. Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd (Bloomington, IN, 1977), 134–37; Pete Axthelm, *The City Game: Basketball From the Garden to the Playgrounds* (1970; rpt., Lincoln, NE, 1999); Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York, 1992); John Feinstein, *The Punch: One Night, Two Lives, and the Fight That Changed Basketball Forever* (New York, 2003); and Jeffrey Lane, *Under the Boards: The Cultural Revolution in Basketball* (Lincoln, NE, 2007). For examples of studies that include professional basketball in a broader examination of race and sports, see John Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (Boston, 1997); Kenneth L. Shropshire, *In Black and White: Race and Sports in America* (New York, 1998); William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York, 2007); Dave Zirin, *What’s My Name, Fool? Sports and Resistance in the United States* (Chicago, 2005); and Jeffrey T. Sammons, “Race and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination,” *Journal of Sport History* 21 (Fall 1994): 203–78.

would matter greatly once the team arrived. Selling a black team and a black league to the white South in the 1960s was a significant chore. Atlanta acquired the Hawks less than a month after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Before the team's first game in its new home city, Tommie Smith and John Carlos would bring the threat of Black Power into every white southern home with their black-gloved, clenched fist salute at the Olympic Games in Mexico City.

Management responded by dismantling a highly successful and largely black team and replacing it with a less successful but more marketable white one. In this case, the economics of the South actually worked against the economics of the Sunbelt. A business designed to be a lucrative metropolitan status symbol eroded under the racial weight placed upon it by the citizens who attended the games and thus made that status symbol possible. Georgians were not hostile to the Hawks in any sustained way, but their lethargy was unequivocally racial and carried racial consequences that extended beyond the bounds of sports.

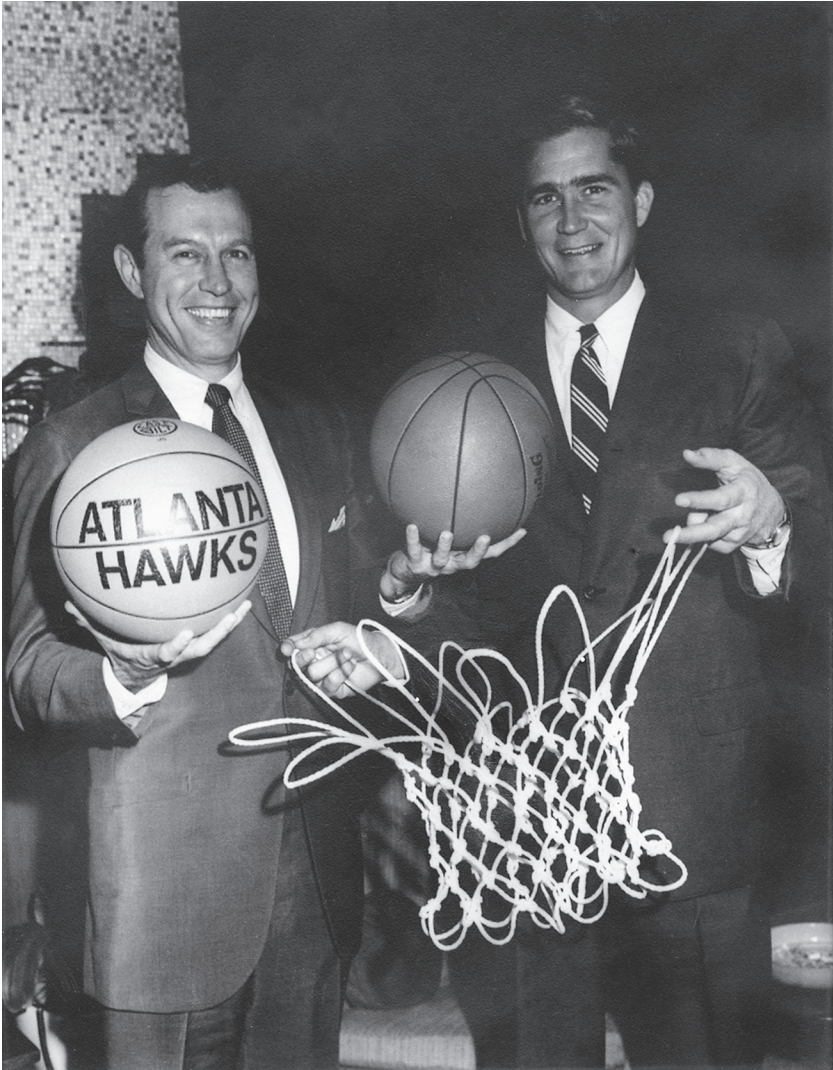
When Boston Braves owner Lou Perini realized in the early 1950s that even with a winning team he could not compete locally with the Red Sox, he decided to move his franchise to Milwaukee, where he owned a Braves minor league farm team. The team won the World Series in 1957, and fans flocked to the ballpark. But attendance faltered after the championship—and after the novelty of professional baseball wore off—and in 1962 Perini sold the team to a group of investors hoping to relocate to Atlanta. They did, capitalizing on there being no other baseball team within seven states, and using the one medium that would explode professional sports in the Sunbelt: television. The Braves' first television contract in Atlanta was worth \$2.5 million. After the Braves came the NFL's Falcons. Atlanta mayor Ivan Allen Jr. sought sports teams to validate the growing success of the city, burnishing Atlanta's reputation as a "major league" place. He once bragged that the city built Fulton County Stadium, the Braves and Falcons' original home, "on ground we didn't own with money we didn't have for clubs we had not yet signed." While the stadium was important—it was the principal cog in discussions of Sunbelt business imperatives and metropolitan infrastructure growth—television was more so. It made

sports more accessible, and it turned competitions into soap operas. Ballplayers were not far away, shrunken by the distance of a far flung seat. They were close up. They were replayed. They had life stories. Sports became personal.³

Tom Cousins, however, was concerned less with television and more with traditional notions of infrastructure, principally the revitalization of downtown Atlanta. The key to this renaissance was a sports arena: "I was concerned with developing sixty acres of downtown Atlanta," he explained. "A coliseum was the key to the whole thing, some focal point to build around." Cousins was a prominent real estate developer whose land in downtown Atlanta would be worth much more if the area could be populated with businesses that catered to the now-suburban middle class. Urban renewal was a rarity for Sunbelt reclamation projects, which typically allowed businesses to follow the migrations of their citizens, thus creating their telltale sprawl.⁴ Cousins's boosterism and financial interest in the downtown area situated his newfound devotion to professional basketball and reversed the typical suburban development trends of the 1960s. It was an effort to increase the value of his city property, which was losing value because of the outmigration of white Atlanta residents to the suburbs. That migration was part of what the historian Kevin Kruse has termed white Atlanta's "fluid relationship" with the changing state of segregation in the face of the gains of the Civil Rights Movement; it eliminated ugly racial confrontations and allowed white Atlanta to congratulate itself

³Kathryn Jay, *More Than Just a Game: Sports In American Life Since 1945* (New York, 2004), 79–81, 82. For more on the relationship between sports and television, see Benjamin G. Rader, *In Its Own Image: How Television Has Transformed Sports* (New York, 1984).

⁴Jeffrey Denberg, Roland Lazenby, and Tom Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique* (Atlanta, 1992), 15, 31–32. The development of Sunbelt cities has its own growing historiography, particularly in relation to cities in the South. For examples, see Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945–1980* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1995); James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936–1990* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1998); David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607–1980* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1982); Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998); Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920–1960* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1987); and Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York, 1986). For work specifically on Atlanta, see Howard L. Preston, *Automobile Age Atlanta: The Making of a Southern Metropolis, 1900–1935* (Athens, GA, 1979); Charles Rutherford, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (New York, 1996); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); and Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996).



Former governor Carl Sanders and real estate mogul Tom Cousins bought the St. Louis Hawks in 1968 and moved the team to Atlanta. The Hawks would be the first NBA team in the South. *Photo courtesy of the Associated Press.*

on its relative progressivism. Downtown gentrification would do much the same thing by pricing poor black residents out of the construction area while keeping suburban white Atlantans

engaged with the city center, thus keeping those white economies tied to downtown and perpetuating the pleasing myth of racial accord.⁵

Cousins originally planned to build an arena to woo a professional team, but Ivan Allen warned him off. Allen explained that he had gone that route before securing the NFL's Falcons for the city and it almost backfired. "Get your franchise first," he told Cousins. "Then we'll build a coliseum." So the developer simply followed Allen's advice. "That's the reason I bought the Hawks," said Cousins. "I needed them to get the development going." To that end, he teamed with attorney and former Georgia governor Carl Sanders and purchased a basketball team for Atlanta.⁶

Ben Kerner and Leo Ferris founded the team as the Buffalo Bisons in 1946, the same year the Boston Celtics and New York Knickerbockers joined the Basketball Association of America, forerunner of the NBA. The team included, among other players, William "Pop" Gates, former star of the Harlem-based Renaissance Big Five barnstorming team of the 1930s and 1940s. Gates, who played his college basketball at Atlanta University, integrated the team and the league the year prior to Jackie Robinson's 1947 Dodgers debut, and thus the team that became the Hawks began the original blackening of the NBA.⁷ From Buffalo, Kerner moved the team to the Mississippi River, locating in the area of Rock Island and Moline in Illinois and Davenport in Iowa, renaming the team the Tri-Cities Blackhawks after the area's infamous Black

⁵As Kruse notes, "Although the suburbs were just as segregated as the city—and, truthfully, more so—white residents succeeded in convincing the courts, the nation, and even themselves that this phenomenon represented de facto segregation, something that stemmed not from the race-conscious actions of residents but instead from less offensive issues like class stratification and postwar sprawl." Kruse, *White Flight*, 6–10, quote from p. 8. See also David Andrew Harmon, *Beneath the Image of the Civil Rights Movement and Race Relations: Atlanta, Georgia, 1946–1981* (New York, 1996), 127–65. For other examples of downtown revitalization projects and their relationship to race, see Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty, Planning, and Politics in the New Boston: The Origins of ABCD* (New York, 1969); Gregory J. Crowley, *The Politics of Place: Contentious Urban Redevelopment in Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2005); and Neil Smith and Peter Williams, eds., *Gentrification of the City* (Boston, MA, 1986).

⁶Five years later, Cousins would field the expansion Flames in the National Hockey League to fill more dates at the arena he would eventually build, the Omni. The hockey team was a foreign animal to the sports-loving population of Atlanta and, unlike the Hawks, would not stay. Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 15, 31–32.

⁷*Ibid.*, 17–18; and "William P. Gates," Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, <http://www.hoophall.com/hall-of-famers/tag/william-p-gates>, accessed December 5, 2012. See also Bob Kuska, *Hot Potato: How Washington and New York Gave Birth to Black Basketball and Changed America's Game Forever* (Charlottesville, VA, 2004).

Hawk War. It was an area with a small-town mentality, and no hotel in Moline would house Gates. Kerner would not invite him back for the 1947–1948 season.⁸

From the Tri-Cities it was on to Milwaukee (a larger market that Kerner hoped could provide more profit), where the newly named Hawks suffered through a span of losing seasons. Those losses ensured that profit would not come, and in 1955 the team moved again, this time to St. Louis. Under the leadership of general manager Marty Blake and the play of star Bob Pettit, the team began to have real success, making the NBA finals in 1957, its second St. Louis season (the series ended in a game-seven loss to the Celtics). The following year, the Hawks improved again, winning the franchise's only championship after a six-game series with the Celtics. The Hawks would be the last all-white championship team in the NBA.⁹

Bill Russell was the star of those Celtics teams and one of those principally responsible for both stabilizing the NBA and beginning the process of its blackening. When Russell debuted, there were only fifteen black NBA players, and he would be the first iconic national black figure in the league, taking his place among the likes of Jesse Owens in track, Joe Louis in boxing, and Jackie Robinson in baseball. He became a representative of his race in basketball. And he did it two years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. When Wilt Chamberlain entered the league in 1959, the rivalry that developed between he and Russell drove the success of the NBA through the next decade. "Never before have so many people taken an active interest in professional basketball," wrote *Sport* magazine's Barry Gottehrer. "Suddenly, housewives and college coeds who generally avoid athletic events with a passion are taking sides in this battle between the giants."¹⁰

But not in the South. The Chamberlain-Russell rivalry dominated coverage of professional basketball and thus contributed to the assumption by whites that the NBA was a black league. Rus-

⁸Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 17–18.

⁹Aram Goudsouzian, "Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution," *American Studies* 47 (Fall-Winter 2006): 66; and Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 19–23.

¹⁰Barry Gottehrer, "When Wilt and Russell Meet," *Sport* (March 1960): 38–40; and Goudsouzian, "Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution," 63, 65, 68. Goudsouzian's article has since been expanded into a book. For a broader treatment of Russell and his relationship to the intersection of race and basketball, see Aram Goudsouzian, *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution* (Berkeley, CA, 2010).

sell used his success to participate in the Civil Rights Movement, leading marches in Boston and participating in others like the March on Washington. He involved himself in Freedom Summer in Mississippi in 1964. "I don't like most white people because they are white," Russell famously announced in the early 1960s. "Conversely, I like most Negroes because they are black. Show me the lowest, most downtrodden Negro and I will say to you that man is my brother."¹¹ By 1965, almost half of the NBA's players were black. Two-thirds of its starters were black. Three-fourths of its all-stars were black. And those players had expanded interest in the game. Television ratings were up, as was the NBA's overall popularity.¹² But the blackness of the league, combined with statements like those of Russell, only stoked the racial skepticism of southern white sports fans about the viability of the NBA in their region.

Russell's least favorite place to play was St. Louis, considered by many in the 1950s and early 1960s to be the NBA's most racist city. Before the Celtics and Lakers became championship rivals, the Hawks dominated the West and provided an annual challenge for the Celtics. The two played for the NBA championship in 1957, 1958, 1960, and 1961. In December 1956, the Celtics played

¹¹Bill Russell, *Go Up for Glory* (New York, 1966), 166, 168–70, 208–13.

¹²And it was not simply the South that carried such racial skepticism. In February 1966, *Sport* magazine ran a controversial article wondering aloud whether or not the NBA was developing too many black players for its own good. For more on the NBA and race, see note 2. A follow-up to that article in May 1966 began with two awkward exchanges. In the first, Howard Cosell asked Wilt Chamberlain whether "perhaps there are too many Negro players in the National Basketball Association for box-office appeal." Chamberlain, boxed into a corner, responded, "I definitely think that probably we have." In the second, a former player told a reporter that he could not bear to watch the 1965 All Star Game, because seven of the ten starters were black. "I was disgusted," he said. "There were just too many of them. I couldn't get interested in watching them play." While such exchanges were disturbing, the controversy generated by the article came from readers concerned that worry over league blackness and suggestions for expansion were coming from the magazine itself, rather than the league. Months later, *Sport* would run a clarification that explained that it was reporting on the fears of NBA players, coaches, and officials, not on its own concerns about the racial makeup of the league. Goudsouzian, "Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution," 73–74; John Devaney, "Pro Basketball's Hidden Fear," *Sport* (February 1966): 32–33, 89–90; and "The Hidden Fear That Is Not Our Fear," *Sport* (May 1966): 104. The notion that league expansion would create more roster space for white players, and thus create a version of racial cleansing, would backfire to a degree for Atlanta. The Phoenix Suns and Milwaukee Bucks—the league's two expansion teams in 1968—participated in the league's expansion draft on Monday, May 6, just days after the Hawks announced their move to Atlanta. The Suns took guard Dick Snyder and center Gene Tormohlen in the first two rounds, eliminating two of the team's white players. *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968.

a game in St. Louis's Kiel Auditorium. "The ball went up and Bob Pettit of the Hawks and I jumped for it," recalled Russell.

"Coon.

"Go back to Africa, you baboon.

"Watch out, Pettit, you'll get covered with chocolate.

"Black nigger.'

"There was no doubt who the fans were yelling at," Russell said. "I was the only Negro athlete on either team."¹³

It was not the kind of reaction that encouraged management to invest in black players, but ultimately the competitive pressure of the NBA would give the Hawks little choice. St. Louis was still an ostensibly southern town with segregationist policies in much of the city. The fan base was white and expected white players on its team. Lenny Wilkens was the second black player in St. Louis history, arriving in 1960 to join Sihugo Green, who signed the year before. The black players were expected to rebound the ball and pass to the white stars. This racial mixing was new, and most of the white players, like LSU's Bob Pettit, Kentucky's Cliff Hagan, and Kansas's Clyde Lovellette had never played with black players.¹⁴

When Green, for example, turned over the ball, as David Halberstam noted, "the whites would not say anything, they would simply raise their eyebrows as if to say, *what can you expect, that's the way they are.*" Away from the court, things were not much better. Wilkens once received \$25 for a promotional event in St. Louis, while his white teammates Bob Pettit and Walter Hagan received \$75. "That was St. Louis," wrote Halberstam.¹⁵

St. Louis was also particularly difficult for visiting black players. It could be "the loneliest town in the world." Bill Russell had experienced brief racial attacks in college, "but in St. Louis it was 'baboon . . . nigger . . . black bastard.' Not from the players. Never have I heard a professional ballplayer say anything about race in a game. But the fans were using it as a weapon." It was, for Russell, "the St. Louis of my bitter memories," and the city was notorious throughout the league.¹⁶

¹³Russell, *Go Up for Glory*, 120–21.

¹⁴David Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game* (New York, 1981), 146; and Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 24.

¹⁵The italics are his. Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 146–47.

¹⁶Russell, *Go Up for Glory*, 155, 163.

Still, times were changing. In 1962, the Hawks drafted Zelmo Beaty, Bill Bridges, and John Barnhill, three more black players who would be quality contributors. In 1964, Marty Blake drafted Paul Silas from Creighton and the following year he acquired Joe Caldwell in a trade with Detroit. In 1966, Blake drafted Lou Hudson from Minnesota. Meanwhile, after the 1965 season, injuries forced the retirement of Pettit, the team's one legitimate superstar.¹⁷ In the early 60s, black players came to dominate the team—and much of the league.

There was, however, a danger in such black prominence. “As the game became more exciting, faster, blacker,” explained Halberstam, “it was moving ahead of the fans’ capacity to accept it.” During the 1967–68 season, the new crop of talent led the Hawks to again win the Western Conference regular season (though the team would be upset in the first round of the playoffs). That team won fifty-six games and lost twenty-six. It was a franchise record, but the Hawks had drawn just over five thousand fans to its home games in Kiel Auditorium, an arena built to seat nine thousand. The Hawks franchise was a profitable one, but clearly not as profitable as it could or should have been. Kerner had also tried and failed to persuade the city to build a new arena. Given these setbacks, the team's founder decided to sell.¹⁸

In 1947, basketball promoter Sid Goldberg staged a series of professional games in the South. The enterprise was a near-total failure. Though crowds in New Orleans and Houston seemed excited about the contests, few were elsewhere. Atlanta was perhaps the most inhospitable city, with games drawing only eighty-four paying customers. “We thought Atlanta was a Ku Klux Klan city,” Goldberg remembered. “And our teams had mostly Jewish players.” In 1958, the Celtics played a game in Charlotte, North Carolina, where the black players had to stay in a segregated hotel. Russell was understandably angry and refused to play in Charlotte again. When the Lakers played a game in West Virginia later that

¹⁷Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 24–25.

¹⁸Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 147–48; and Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 27.

season, Elgin Baylor refused to play after being sent to a segregated hotel.¹⁹

Even with myriad similar stories, many entrepreneurs saw southern cities as ripe opportunities for professional basketball. When the American Basketball Association (ABA) arrived to challenge the hegemony of the NBA, it sought to put teams in new, emerging markets so that they could be successful without directly competing with the established league. The South met all of the criteria, so the new association included teams in New Orleans, Dallas, Houston, and Louisville for the 1967–68 season, its first. Though there was no traditional Deep South market, the ABA demonstrated that there could be at least marginal success on the region’s periphery.²⁰

And what success existed was certainly marginal. The Houston franchise struggled in its first season, once drawing only eighty-nine fans to a game. A frustrated T.C. Morrow, Houston’s owner, pulled his team from the league and a group of investors brought it to North Carolina for the 1968–69 season. The culture of the new league also posed problems for owners. ABA audiences in Dallas were shocked by the foul language used by coaches and by the fights between players. “These were gentlemen,” remembered Terry Stenbridge, the Dallas Chaparrals’ radio announcer, “and they came to a nice Sunday afternoon basketball game with their kids.” The original president of the New Orleans Buccaneers was the entertainer Morton Downey. As a promotional tool, “he used to go around town handing out these gold passes, which were life-

¹⁹Russell and his black teammates suffered similar racial difficulties when playing exhibitions in Dallas and Lexington, Kentucky. After being refused service at a restaurant in Lexington, the Celtics’ black players booked tickets on the next flight out of town and did not play. “The people of Lexington, who had a double standard at that time, were not offended at the game that evening,” wrote Russell. “They got just what they apparently wanted—a lily-white basketball game.” The same was true when college players came through. Chet Walker, a Bradley University standout in 1960, described horrendous treatment when his Illinois team made a swing through the South. His coach told the black players “to expect racism and offensive treatment, that it was just the way things were and there was nothing he or we could do about it. Implicit was the idea that we better not cause any incident that would reflect badly on the team or on Bradley. The messages was that the South was going to be different because we were different: this is your lot, accept it, don’t make waves if you want to play.” Russell, *Go Up for Glory*, 113–15, 116–17, 118–19; Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 31; and Chet Walker, “On the Road in the South, 1960,” in *The Uneven Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, eds. David K. Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller (Urbana, IL, 2005), 277–82.

²⁰Terry Pluto, *Loose Balls: The Short, Wild Life of the American Basketball Association* (New York, 1990), 3–4.

time passes to Bucs games,” said Larry Brown. “We’d have 350 people in the stands, and they all got in on those gold passes.” The ABA listed its first-year attendance at 1,200,439, an average of just under 3,000 fans per game. The historian Terry Pluto has referred to such numbers as “wildly overstated.” Indiana and Denver led the league in average attendance at six thousand and four thousand, respectively. The southern teams remained at the bottom of the attendance standings.²¹

Though the crowds were small in the southern venues, the ABA itself proved resilient, simultaneously forcing the NBA to consider expansion as a method of curbing the encroachment of the new league and to consider the possibility of moving into a southern market. The league also put Kerner, whom Halberstam called “one of the last of the old-style owners,” at a decided disadvantage. The growth of the ABA made acquiring a cheap franchise relatively easy and, by extension, made selling an established NBA team that much more difficult. Kerner had been public about his wish to sell the Hawks the previous season, announcing in early January 1967 that he hoped to sell the squad to “either local interests or other cities.” He negotiated a price of \$3.8 million with an investment group from New Orleans, but the group withdrew its offer; Kerner was then forced to consider a lower bid from different New Orleans investors. He found that second deal unacceptable and it collapsed. That bungled sale attempt caused negative publicity in the press, and so negotiations in 1968 would have to be conducted privately.²²

That lack of publicity led to surprise in Atlanta when, on Friday, May 3, less than a month after the assassination of Martin Luther King, and with the wounds that murder caused still gaping, Tom Cousins and Ben Kerner announced that the NBA was offi-

²¹Ibid., 69, 77, 90.

²²That lack of publicity shrouded the next year’s sale in secrecy, but also sped negotiations. It was a collection of quick decisions. Carl Sanders learned that Kerner was selling the Hawks in early April, and Cousins went to St. Louis to meet with him on April 15. It was a hurried affair, to say the least. “Carl Sanders is so accomplished at keeping secrets that he almost kept his location among the Kentucky Derby crowd just among a few friends,” wrote the *Atlanta Journal’s* Furman Bisher, “which isn’t easy for a man whose name is constantly creeping into vice-presidential conversation.” Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 145; Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 28–29; *New York Times*, January, 4, 15, 1967; *Washington Post*, January 4, 9, 13, February 1, 1967; and *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968.

cially coming to the Deep South.²³ It was an unlikely convergence of time and place. Following King's assassination on April 4, riots erupted in Washington, DC, Chicago, Baltimore, Kansas City, and more than one hundred other urban areas nationwide. The uprisings demonstrated to many across the country that black radicalism was not limited to Harlem, Oakland, and Watts. It scared and confused many whites who had trouble reconciling urban violence with the death of a nonviolent leader.²⁴ That radicalism, however, also permeated sports. As the King riots raged, the sociologist Harry Edwards was leading the Olympic Project for Human Rights and organizing a boycott of the 1968 summer Olympics in Mexico City to protest racial inequality and the marginalization of the black athlete.²⁵ April 28, well within the depths of the King and Olympic maelstroms, was the one-year anniversary of Muhammad Ali's refusal to report after being drafted by the United States Army to fight in Vietnam, which led boxing officials to strip him of the heavyweight championship and ban him from the sport.²⁶

Meanwhile, Atlanta was struggling with its own long history of race conflict. Gilded-Age black citizens created schools and churches that became segregated enclaves prior to the turn of the century. Such segregation could be a help or a hindrance. In the 1920s, for example, Atlanta elected a Ku Klux Klansman mayor, and the city served as headquarters for the newly revived organization. In 1952, however, Rufus Clement, president of Atlanta University, was able to take advantage of the segregated black voting bloc to win a seat on the Atlanta school board, becoming the city's first black elected official since the nineteenth century. His ability to win and the lack of overt, grandstanding racism by Atlanta

²³The sale was also announced the day after Bill Russell led the Celtics to their ninth title in ten years and—more ominously—the day after the Atlanta Falcons NFL team announced that preseason season ticket sales had dropped precipitously because of a poor showing in the team's first season. Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 31; *New York Times*, May 4, 1968; *Washington Post*, May 4, 1968; and *Atlanta Journal*, May 3, 1968.

²⁴For more on the riots following the King assassination, see Clay Risen, *A Nation On Fire: American in the Wake of the King Assassination* (Hoboken, NJ, 2009).

²⁵Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York, 1969), 38–69, 91–114; Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis, MN, 2002), 81–130; and Tommie Smith, "Why Negroes Should Boycott," *Sport* (March 1968): 40–41, 68.

²⁶The work on Muhammad Ali is voluminous to the point of ubiquity, but perhaps the best biographical treatment—or, at least, the most helpful for this brief account—is David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (New York, 1999).

public officials in the 1950s and 1960s was the result of the city having a black voting population large enough to keep virulent racists from winning. That was good, but it provided Atlanta with an undeserved reputation for racial moderation that ignored the problems of employment discrimination, pay disparities, segregation, unequal city services, and inadequate education.²⁷ Activists knew better than to celebrate Atlanta's reputation for moderation in race matters. On May 5, two days after the Hawks announcement, a group led by Ralph Abernathy began the "Southern leg" of the Poor People's March on Washington, heading to Atlanta from Alabama. They arrived on May 8.²⁸

The Hawks thus appeared in Atlanta at the intersection of national racial tumult and complicated, racialized local politics. This confluence of race and location pressed upon not only the decision to bring the team to Georgia, but also on where precisely it would play. Kerner, in fact, was originally reluctant to sell to Cousins and Sanders because he assumed that the NBA would never approve a deal that did not include an arena. To address this concern, Cousins signed a contract with Georgia Tech to use Alexander Memorial Coliseum. That was good enough for Kerner, though the stadium barely met league standards, if at all. "The Tech people were great to us and very gracious," said Marty Blake. "But it was a bad building. It had terrible locker rooms and only seated about 7,200. The league wouldn't have approved it, but Benny Kerner was one of the pioneers of pro basketball, and the league people wanted to see him get out of the business with some money."²⁹

Tech was an interesting choice. Later in 1968, Georgia Tech would hire its first black instructor, William Peace, in the Department of Social Sciences. Students would also found the school's

²⁷Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 6–7, 12, 27, 29; and Larry Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion* (Philadelphia, PA, 2001), 41–44.

²⁸*Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968. For more on the state of black rights and protests for them, see Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940–1980* (Athens, GA, 2001), 192–243.

²⁹Carl Sanders actually had a large role to play in securing the use of Alexander Memorial. He had appointed many of Georgia Tech's regents while governor. He was, ultimately, the variable that the Atlanta Falcons did not have, allowing the Hawks to have more favorable relations with the school than did the city's professional football team. Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 32; and Richard Hyatt, interview with author, December 11, 2013.

first black student organization, the Georgia Tech African American Association. In 1969, Tech welcomed Eddie McAshan, the school's first black scholarship football player. It was not until 1971 that Karl Binns integrated the basketball team that typically played in Alexander Memorial.³⁰

The league, however, was actually less concerned with the temporary building and more concerned with the construction of a permanent arena; assurances from the Atlanta ownership group that one would be ready in two years cemented the deal. That was, after all, Cousins's concern as well. The team's new owner had commissioned a study to determine the best way to develop downtown Atlanta and capitalize on his land rights in the city. The study concluded that an arena was the lynchpin of urban development, so Cousins purchased the Hawks. That did not necessarily mean he was interested in basketball. "In the four years I went to the University of Georgia, I probably went to one game," he remembered. "The last basketball game I played was with an Atlanta Athletic Club team," said Cousins. "I was matched against Ewell Pope and he broke two of my ribs." For the players, however, the game still mattered, and Tech's coliseum was old and poorly lit, with a floor placed directly over hard, unforgiving concrete.³¹

Cousins, according to the *Journal's* Jim Minter, would "be in position to be the prime mover if not the builder of a new Madison Square Garden type arena in Atlanta." Cousins certainly understood the responsibility. "We wouldn't have been able to buy the Hawks on the strength of playing in the Tech Coliseum." Despite the relative inadequacy of Tech's arena, its use was a subtle coup. "In the past," Minter reported, "the school has stoutly resist-

³⁰Such was a common pattern with southern universities. Texas Western was the first historically white southwestern university to include black basketball players. In 1966, the school started five black players against lily-white Kentucky and won the NCAA championship. In 1965, TCU became the first Southwest Conference school to integrate its basketball team. Baylor and Arkansas would follow in 1967. In the Southeastern Conference, Vanderbilt desegregated its basketball team in 1966, Auburn in 1967. Alabama would follow in 1969, and Georgia in 1970. "Vice President for Institute Diversity: Timeline," Georgia Institute of Technology, <http://www.diversity.gatech.edu/50thanniversary/timeline>, accessed December 5, 2012; and Charles H. Martin, "Jim Crow in the Gymnasium: The Integration of College Basketball in the American South," in *Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth Century America*, eds. Patrick B. Miller and David K. Wiggins (New York, 2003), 241, 243–45.

³¹Mark Kriegel, *Pistol: The Life of Pete Maravich* (New York, 2007), 180; Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 32; Caldwell, *Banned from Basketball*, chapter 7; and *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968.

ed any move by professional teams to play on the campus.” That resistance seemed certain for basketball, with the added impediment of race thrown into the bargain. But two factors changed that dynamic. First, Alexander Memorial was on the edge of campus, and thus would not affect school activities (a claim used by the school to deny the Falcons the opportunity to play exhibitions at Grant Field, which was in the middle of campus). Second, the school, not the athletic department, owned the coliseum, and the school had proved far more progressive than the sum of its sports programs.³²

“When the St. Louis Hawks swooped down upon us this weekend from the blue, we were not prepared,” admitted an editorialist in the *Atlanta Journal*. “All of a sudden, we had the St. Louis Hawks. Rather, the Atlanta Hawks. Tomorrow we expect to read that someone has brought us Madison Square Garden. That is, Margaret Mitchell Square Garden. For a moment, we felt like a wife whose husband has brought her home 300 pounds of bass, and no deep-freeze.” Based on a study by the Atlanta-Fulton Recreation (Stadium) Authority, Cousins was targeting the area around Spring Street and the Techwood viaduct. If situated near the football stadium and its parking projects, which were already underway, the entire endeavor could come in around \$19 million. The board of aldermen, however, also commissioned a study “for the placement and erection of a coliseum with a seating capacity of 15,000 within the Civic Center complex,” though the Spring Street-Techwood viaduct area was still an option. What every study had in common, however, was a real emphasis on the gentrification of downtown Atlanta. “Margaret Mitchell Square Garden” would help whiten the area around it, if nothing else.³³

Carl Sanders was optimistic about the prospect. While the lawyer and one-time governor from Augusta had been a backup quarterback for the University of Georgia and a reserve player on the school’s basketball team, he was a political animal more than anything else. He argued just days after the move announcement that the building of a new basketball arena in downtown Atlanta could draw the 1972 Democratic National Convention. The

³²The Georgia Tech Board of Regents formally approved the agreement with the Hawks on May 8. *Atlanta Journal*, May 4, 8, 1968.

³³*Atlanta Journal*, May 5, 6, 8, 1968.

Hawks meant a new coliseum, “and if the coliseum is in operation by 1972, then Atlanta certainly could be considered for the party convention,” he argued. It would be “one of the greatest things that could happen to the South. It would really put us in the mainstream of America.”³⁴

The NBA was just as interested in the gentrification project. Commissioner Walter Kennedy clearly wanted to approve the transfer—mostly to help Kerner, who had been so vital to the early development of the league—but still made the deal contingent on Atlanta’s ability to build a new arena. The Hawks had their introductory press conference at the downtown Marriott on May 16. Sanders attended, along with Commissioner Kennedy. Hawks forward Bill Bridges claimed to welcome the change, hoping for more fan interest. “We filled up the building one time [in St. Louis],” said Bridges, “and that was for a doubleheader with the Globetrotters. The crowd came to see the Globetrotters.”³⁵

Bridges certainly had a point. The Hawks’ playoff attendance in 1968 was poor. Against the San Francisco Warriors, Kiel Auditorium crowds numbered just over five thousand for two games, and when the third St. Louis game moved to Washington University because of a prior commitment, attendance fell to around four thousand. Kerner said that disappointment affected his decision to sell. Still, Bridges may have been searching for a diamond in a sea of coal. “I was surprised but not really shocked,” said center Zelmo Beaty about the sale. “I haven’t talked with the owners yet and haven’t collected my ideas about it. I always felt Atlanta was a possibility. Atlanta has a complete sports field.”³⁶

Bridges and Beaty were stars, but Bridges and Beaty were also black. There was, despite poor St. Louis attendance figures—and poor racial treatment in St. Louis—an assumption that Deep South racial practices would make things even more problematic

³⁴The Omni did not actually open until October 1972, the start of the NBA season; therefore, the 1972 Democratic National Convention was held in Miami. *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968; and Robert Coram and Remer Tyson, “The Loser Who Won,” *Atlanta Magazine* (November 1970): 43.

³⁵*Atlanta Journal*, May 5, 16, 17, 1968.

³⁶There was a similar kind of guarded optimism among the region’s college coaches. “It really should help all of us to have that kind of basketball in the area,” said Auburn’s Bill Lynn. “They (the pros) will probably be looking more to Southeastern area college players as prospects, and over-all interest in basketball should be helped a great deal.” *Atlanta Journal*, May 4, 5, 1968.

for black players. Beaty and Bridges, Joe Caldwell and Jim Davis, Lou Hudson and Paul Silas, and the team's biggest star, Lenny Wilkens, were all black. The Hawks were a good team. They were the defending Western Division champions in 1968. But they were also a black team, and they were coming to a Deep South Sunbelt city that was gentrifying part of its downtown to make room for them. They were initially to play in an arena whose usual team, the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets, had yet to integrate.³⁷ Regardless of the Sunbelt business model that drove stadium construction in Atlanta, the organization would always have to deal with race.

In an effort to broaden the team's appeal beyond the bounds of the Atlanta city limits, the team hired a local public relations director, Richard Hyatt, who was an assistant sports information director at Georgia Tech. Among his other duties, Hyatt toured the state speaking at civic clubs, calling on the media, and trying to sell the NBA to local citizens of Macon, Rome, Columbus, and other cities. The people to whom he spoke knew Bill Russell. They knew Wilt Chamberlain. But they did not know much more than that. And race was always a concern. At a civic club speech in Macon, someone in the audience asked, "Are there any white players in this league?" Hyatt told him about the Hawks' Gene Tormohlen and Don Ohl. "What about the league itself?" was the response. "Aren't the main ones all black?" Similar questions were asked at every public relations stop. Even more problematic for Hyatt, those questions did not just come from fans. Sportswriters in smaller Georgia cities were posing the same questions.³⁸

When the team went on the road to play an exhibition against Chicago in Auburn, Alabama, for example, the black players struggled to get service at a restaurant. After finally getting food after repeated demands, Caldwell claims that they left the waitress "a penny tip to remind her that Abe Lincoln freed the slaves almost a century ago and that we are all equal human beings." Still,

³⁷Or, as J. Richard Munro, publisher of *Sports Illustrated*, would argue, "Players from the NBA Hawks, most of them black, were apprehensive at first about their shift to Atlanta from St. Louis. But the team management, assisted by Bill Bridges, put on a PR (for 'player relations') campaign that assuaged the team's fears." J. Richard Munroe, "Letter from the Publisher," *Sports Illustrated*, August 24, 1970, 6.

³⁸Lou Woodruff was friends with Tom Cousins and an assistant football coach at Georgia Tech. Cousins turned over the Hawks' on-the-ground operations to Woodruff prior to the team's actual move, and Woodruff, who knew Hyatt from Tech, hired him for the public relations job. Richard Hyatt, interview with author, December 11, 2013.

to be fair, Atlanta was not tiny Auburn. “While conditions weren’t up to par,” said Caldwell, “the people of Atlanta were first-class.” Besides, the problems for players were far subtler than that.³⁹

Lenny Wilkens was runner-up to Wilt Chamberlain in the 1968 MVP vote, but made \$30,000 per year in comparison to Chamberlain’s \$250,000. Kerner was known as the cheapest owner in the NBA and, as David Halberstam noted, “One year he boasted to Wilkens that he had run the entire club for \$100,000.” Wilkens wanted a modest \$60,000 per year in response to his runner-up season and the discrepancy between he and Chamberlain, but the team only offered him \$40,000. Atlanta fully expected to have Wilkens, as he was featured prominently in descriptive articles about the incoming team in Atlanta newspapers. “I really don’t think Lennie will be any problem,” said Blake, “and to be honest, we’re not too worried about him. He’ll play, I’m sure of that.” But Wilkens held out, and the team responded by fining him for not reporting to camp, then trading him to Seattle for Walt Hazzard. The last thing the new black team in the Deep South needed was a militant, uppity black man making rights claims to white southerners. “They’re going to love Walt Hazzard in Atlanta,” wrote the *Journal’s* Teague Jackson. Even Ben Kerner weighed in, absurdly arguing, “Hazzard is a better ballplayer, he has quicker hands than Lennie.” Such was the variance in the racism of city and town. Wilkens could easily have eaten in almost any Atlanta restaurant, but he could not get fair pay for his value.⁴⁰

The most significant problems, however, existed for the players who were not traded. “By 1968, when Wilkens finally left, the Hawks—now in Atlanta—were on their way to becoming one of the first great black basketball teams in the league,” Halberstam explained. “The old white stars had gradually moved on, to be replaced by talented blacks like Wilkens, Zelmo Beaty, Bill Bridges, Paul Silas, Joe Caldwell, Lou Hudson, all exceptional players and role players as well.” But the team was keenly

³⁹Caldwell, *Banned from Basketball*, chapter 7.

⁴⁰When the Hawks travelled to Seattle in late October, however, Wilkens and the Supersonics drubbed the visitors from the South, 123–112. Wilkens scored twenty-one points, Hazzard twelve. Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 33; Caldwell, *Banned from Basketball*, chapter 6; Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 148; and *Atlanta Journal*, May 5, 7, August 11, 15, September 6, 13, 17, 26, 1968.

aware of the role race played in the region and responded to its move to the Deep South by drafting South Carolina's Skip Harlicka, Vanderbilt's Bob Warren, and Miami's Rusty Parker, three white players from southern schools who would never live up to whatever marginal amount of hype they received. The moves were clearly made with at least some recognition of the team's new fan base. Or, in the words of Halberstam, "For a time, five blacks started; then a white player was obtained so that at least one white could start at home, and Joe Caldwell, averaging nearly twenty points a game, went, much to his displeasure, to the bench."⁴¹

Bob Warren was white and southern, but he was not quite good enough to make the team. The Hawks encouraged him to sign with the ABA in July. Skip Harlicka would not make the squad either, joining the US army instead. The Hawks also acquired rookie Dick Nemelka. The former Brigham Young star had been serving his Mormon mission in Australia for two years and was finally ready to join the Hawks, who had drafted him in 1966. In June, the team signed white forward Ron Krick from the University of Cincinnati. In late August, the Hawks signed Jim Davis, who had played with the team before, prior to a two-year stint in the Eastern League. Davis replaced Gene Tormohlen, who retired as a player to become one of coach Richie Guerin's assistant coaches. Jim Davis was the team's only black acquisition. Through the draft and other roster maneuvers, the whitening of the Hawks had begun; its early success, however, was limited because the acquired players were not good enough to make the team. Don Ohl was the only white player listed as a member of the Hawks in the *Journal's* introduction of the players to the city in early May, and he and

⁴¹The Hawks took Phil Wagner of Georgia Tech in the sixth round, Oscar Smith in the seventh, and Mac Daughtry of Albany State in the ninth. The only non-southerners were Martin Biatti from Manhattan College and Phil Harris from UTEP. The draft seems all the more surprising because Blake was considered a master of scouting. "We make up a list of a couple hundred of the nation's best high school seniors each spring," he explained. "Two years later we look for their names to appear in the rosters of the college teams and if they don't, we start searching for them." It was, he explained, an involved process. Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 147; Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 33; and *Atlanta Journal*, May 5, 8, 9, 1968.

Arizona State's Dennis Hamilton would be the only white players on the team on opening day.⁴²

That left the black players wondering about their place on the team and in the town. Richard Hyatt picked up Joe Caldwell from the Atlanta airport on one of his early visits to the city. He drove Caldwell and his wife to the downtown Marriott, where Caldwell looked at him and observed, "I haven't seen anybody in a white hood yet." Caldwell and his fellow players came to Atlanta armed with stereotypical expectations of the South and their own personal worries about interracial interactions. Combined with the legitimate, if subtler, white racism that did exist in the city and the region, those kinds of assumptions by players created a combustible situation for everyone involved.⁴³

The team's first season in Atlanta was chaotic. The Hawks started slowly while adjusting to the loss of Wilkens. After a defeat at the hands of the Lakers on December 6, the team was 12–15. But the group recovered. A twelve-game win streak in December and January following the Lakers loss led to larger crowds.⁴⁴ The floor at Tech also continued to be a problem during the season. It was so hard and problematic that Guerin ordered that the team change practice venues in early November. It moved practice to the city's Jewish community center. The team also stayed in the news with strange incidents, like the time in January when Richie Guerin assaulted a Philadelphia sportswriter. The Hawks finished their first

⁴²And then there was the trial of Lou Hudson. Hudson signed with both the St. Louis Hawks and the Minnesota Muskies of the ABA. He honored the Hawks contract. The Muskies moved to Miami, and the cash-strapped team sued the Hawks over the Hudson double-signing, a suit that fell upon the heads of Cousins and Sanders, though the transaction occurred under the reign of Kerner. The Miami hearing took place in mid-September as the Hawks were beginning training camp. In US District Court Hudson requested that he have a jury trial to determine whether he would play in Atlanta or Miami. Hudson's strategy worked. He played in Atlanta. *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, June 9, July 15, August 15, 28, September 4, October 15, 1968; and *New York Times*, July 28, 1968.

⁴³Richard Hyatt, interview with author, December 11, 2013.

⁴⁴That slow start brought Guerin off the bench to reprise his role as player-coach. After fifteen games the team had a losing record. In a game at Cincinnati against the Royals, Guerin suited up and played briefly. He played in twenty-seven games during the season, adding another white player to the roster. "Atlanta Hawks at Cincinnati Royals Box Score, November 18, 1968," Basketball Reference, <http://www.basketball-reference.com/boxscores/196811160CIN.html>, accessed November 30, 2013; and "1968–69 Atlanta Hawks Schedule and Results," Basketball Reference, <http://www.basketball-reference.com/teams/ATL/1969.html>, accessed November 30, 2013. Description of the season comes from the *Atlanta Journal*, which reported on each game. For the Lakers loss, see *Atlanta Journal*, December 7, 1968. For the twelve-game winning streak, see *Atlanta Journal*, January 4, 1969.

Atlanta season 48–34, second in the West behind the Lakers; they ultimately lost the Division finals to the Lakers four games to one. (As Atlanta lost Lenny Wilkens in a trade with Seattle, Los Angeles gained Wilt Chamberlain in a trade with Philadelphia.)⁴⁵

Attendance was not strong in that first season, though the team was obviously competitive. Management responded by further whitening the team at the expense of the squad's talent. That offseason, Zelmo Beaty left the team for the ABA, and Guerin traded all-star Paul Silas for white forward Gary Gregor. "That was the worst deal I made as a coach," Guerin said later. "Gregor had played well in his first two years, and I wanted him as another big scoring forward. But the trading of Paul Silas was another part of the team's demise." It was certainly part of the team's demise, but Guerin's claim that he really wanted Gregor is questionable at best. Not only had Gregor played but one NBA season (not two) when the trade happened, his statistics were not significantly better than Silas's at all. He was another southern white player from the University of South Carolina. Again, race was either a conscious or subconscious motivation for the Hawks acquiring him.⁴⁶

The draft also evidenced racial thinking. In April 1969, the Hawks took star Louisville guard Butch Beard in the first round and Wally Anderzunas of Creighton in the second. While Beard was black, none of the team's other picks were. Team officials drafted Billy Hahn from Tennessee in the fourth round, Guy Mackner of South Dakota in the sixth, and Bob Bundy of Vanderbilt in the seventh. With the new crop of white players filling out the roster, Atlanta seemed more excited about its professional basketball team. WSB-TV had broadcast the team's first Atlanta

⁴⁵The Hawks defeated the San Diego Rockets in the first round of the NBA playoffs in late March and early April 1969 in order to face the Lakers. *Atlanta Journal*, November 7, 1968, March 25, 26, 1969; Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 35; and Alfred Wright, "Brave Words from a Hawk and a Warrior," *Sports Illustrated*, March 24, 1969, 26–28, 33–34, 37.

⁴⁶Not only had Silas played four more seasons than Gregor, despite being only two years his senior, he was also by far a more complete player, out-rebounding and out-assisting his white counterpart. His 1097 points in the 1967–1968 season dipped in his first Atlanta campaign, but his points-per-forty-minutes remained almost identical to that of Gregor, even with his emphasis on rebounding and assisting. Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 35; *Atlanta Journal*, May 9, 1969; "Paul Silas," Basketball Reference, <http://www.basketball-reference.com/players/s/silaspa01.html>, accessed November 10, 2012; and "Gary Gregor," Basketball Reference, <http://www.basketball-reference.com/players/g/gregoga01.html>, accessed November 10, 2012. See also, Frank DeFord, "Goodbye to the Old Balance of Power," *Sports Illustrated*, October 27, 1969, 30–31.

game in its inaugural season, but increased its commitment in the second season to eight games. WSB radio would also broadcast every Hawks game.⁴⁷

Of course, media interest was not entirely related to the changing racial makeup of the team. The Hawks' first season was successful, and television and radio stations assumed (erroneously, in this case) that victories would drive fan interest. The problem with such assumptions, however, was that popularity at the prospect of seeing white players did not produce success on the court. The Hawks began the 1969–70 season strongly, going 12–3 in the team's first fifteen games. But the poor personnel moves ultimately took their toll. On February 1, the Hawks were 32–26, but in the midst of a four-game losing streak. Blake responded by acquiring Walt Bellamy from Detroit. Bellamy filled holes in the team's rebounding and led Atlanta to a 15–6 finish, giving them the regular season Western Division crown over an injury-plagued Lakers team. In the conference finals, however, the Lakers were again healthy and dominated the Hawks four games to none. The erosion of a successful franchise had begun, calcifying at the hands of racial politics. And that erosion hurt the season's early popularity. Attendance during the 1969–70 season was less than five thousand per game. Part of that lackluster showing was because Atlanta was a southern town, and thus fixated almost exclusively on college football. But race also mattered. The team had an arena to fill, "and they weren't going to do it by having a black team in the heart of the South," said one white player.⁴⁸

In the offseason, the Hawks had the third pick in the draft. Blake later claimed that he wanted Florida State center Dave Cowens. Guerin remembered preferring Dan Issel from Kentucky.

⁴⁷*Atlanta Journal*, October 16, 1968, April 8, May 7, June 18, 1969.

⁴⁸1969–70 Atlanta Hawks Schedule and Results," Basketball Reference, http://www.basketball-reference.com/teams/ATL/1970_games.html, accessed October 3, 2013; *Atlanta Journal*, November 14, 15, 1969, February 1, 2, 4, 1970; Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 34; Kriegel, *Pistol*, 191; Frank DeFord, "Beware of the Hawks," *Sports Illustrated*, April 13, 1970, 22–27; and *New York Times*, March 21, 1970. This emphasis on playing to a white southern audience had a far more overt precursor earlier in the decade when George Preston Marshall, owner of the Washington Redskins football team, refused to draft black players in order to curry favor with segregationists in Virginia and points south. Of course, the Hawks did draft black players and the federal government did not have to pressure them to do so (as it did Marshall), but the emphasis on whiteness as a source of marketing had been clearly established. See Thomas G. Smith, *Showdown: JFK and the Integration of the Washington Redskins* (Boston, MA, 2011).

Tom Cousins, however, overruled them both.⁴⁹ Cowens and Issel were white southerners as well, but Cousins was after a white player who performed like a black player. He coveted the Great White Hope.

Even before he bought the Hawks, in January 1968, Cousins attended a basketball game in Athens between the University of Georgia and LSU. An LSU sophomore named Pete Maravich amazed the real estate man and everyone else in attendance. When he bought the Hawks, Cousins vowed not to involve himself in basketball decisions, with one notable exception: "I don't know anything about basketball," he told Guerin and Blake, "but if we ever have a shot at this guy Maravich, I want him." Guerin told him that he was not sure Maravich would "ever make it in the NBA." That, however, was not Cousins's concern. "He'll make the sport in Atlanta, Georgia."⁵⁰ There was clear racial calculation in that statement, but there was, in all fairness, also the enthusiasm of someone who had been awed by a singular talent. Or, perhaps, an original enthusiasm over a singular talent developed into a racial calculation that would stimulate business in downtown Atlanta.

Cousins hired Bob Kent to manage the development of the team's arena, and Kent was close to Press Maravich, Pete's father and coach at LSU. The Hawks had the San Francisco Warriors' first round draft pick because of an earlier trade, and since the Warriors struggled through the 1969–70 season, that pick began looking better and better (as the quality of draft choices was inverse to teams' success the previous season). Anticipating a high choice, Cousins sent Kent to Baton Rouge to recruit Maravich away from the increasingly powerful ABA. The younger league targeted Maravich in his junior year at LSU, the owners deciding that the Carolina Cougars should be the team to draft him. ABA owners, too, understood the draw of white superstars in the South, and they were in competition with the NBA far more than with each other. There had been talk of making Press Maravich the

⁴⁹Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 34.

⁵⁰Kriegel, *Pistol*, 181.

Carolina coach; that effort fell through, but recruitment of the younger Maravich never stopped.⁵¹

After Detroit and San Diego selected Bob Lanier and Rudy Tomjanovich in the draft, respectively, the Atlanta Hawks used the third pick in the 1970 NBA draft on Maravich. Guerin was angry. “I found out the night before the draft that we were taking Pete Maravich.” Blake was so frustrated that he resigned after sixteen years with the team. The Hawks refused to give Lenny Wilkens a \$60,000 contract two years before, but in 1970 gave “Pistol” Pete a massive deal. It guaranteed the LSU guard \$1.5 million for five years, with performance bonuses and a no-trade clause. The Hawks would provide him with his own private secretary, an apartment, and a new car—complete with car phone—prior to each season. He also received \$50 a month for gas. The contract was \$400,000 more than that of Bob Lanier, who was drafted number one overall, and it was \$500,000 more than that of Lew Alcindor, who was drafted first the previous season. As a kind of racial damage control, rumors began almost immediately that the signing, though expensive, increased season ticket sales by a third within the first twenty-four hours.⁵²

The Hawks had another first round pick in 1970, using it on white UCLA guard John Vallely, the only player drafted in that year’s first round with a negative career win shares statistic. Still on the board when Atlanta took the redundant and mediocre Vallely with the fourteenth pick were future all-star guards Calvin Murphy and Tiny Archibald. “He couldn’t play dead,” Blake said of Vallely. The team gave him a \$300,000 two-year contract nonetheless. Only adding to the tumult, the team used its second-round pick to select Dan Hester, Maravich’s teammate at LSU. He would not make the team, instead playing for both the Denver Rockets

⁵¹Kent offered Press a job in the front office too, which he rejected. “I’m not riding on the kid’s coattails,” Press told his old friend. Still, Kent was able to debunk many of Carolina’s lavish promises. *Ibid.*, 179–80, 182; and Frank DeFord, “Merger, Madness and Maravich,” *Sports Illustrated*, April 6, 1970, 29–33.

⁵²After the Hawks drafted Maravich, Jim Gardner, Carolina’s owner, went on the attack. “Tom Cousins will think Quantrell’s Raiders were a bunch of amateurs if Atlanta lucks out and signs Pete Maravich.” The Confederate imagery was telling, but the prediction was wrong. Cousins sold Maravich on the better competition of the NBA, counting on an athlete’s ego to bring him over. Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 34; and Kriegel, *Pistol*, 183–85.

and Kentucky Colonels of the ABA during that 1970–71 season. It would be the only year of his professional career.⁵³

The addition of Maravich would mean the loss of Joe Caldwell. A loophole in Caldwell's contract allowed him to become a free agent. When the 1970 all-star used that provision as leverage to get a deal that more closely resembled the money being paid to the team's unproven white talent, the Hawks demurred. In February 1970, the NBA signed a new three-year contract with ABC, assuring the league a minimum of twenty-eight televised games. "Maravich was pegged as the great white hope of the ball club," in Caldwell's view, "as well as its main drawing card." Caldwell eventually left for the ABA's Carolina Cougars. He claimed decades later, in a self-published memoir, that Tom Cousins had said during contract talks that he would prefer one white player over six black ones, and used a racial epithet in the course of the conversation." Caldwell left the negotiating table and vowed never to play for Atlanta again. He was certainly bitter about his release, and so had reason to exaggerate; Cousins also never had a reputation as an overt racist. Still, Caldwell's comfort with such a public pronouncement of racism—whether the Hawks' owner ever used racial slurs or not—demonstrates the contentious racial atmosphere he perceived within the Hawks organization.⁵⁴

Publicly, the players claimed to support the Maravich draft decision. "A white player of his ability is what Atlanta and the NBA need," Bill Bridges told the media the day after the draft. "He may be the greatest gate attraction to come in the league, and that doesn't hurt. It could mean a couple of hundred thousand dollars to all of us Hawks." Privately, things were more problematic. Because of the situation on the team, with the new white showboat player being paid massively more than the established, successful black veterans, Maravich became the scapegoat for every player concern. "It was always Pete's fault," said team statistician Hank Kalb.⁵⁵

⁵³Win shares are an advanced metric used by the NBA to estimate the number of wins to a team's record contributed by a given player. "1970 NBA Draft," Basketball Reference, http://www.basketball-reference.com/draft/NBA_1970.html, accessed November 10, 2012; Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 34; and "Dan Hester," Basketball Reference, <http://www.basketball-reference.com/players/h/hesteda01.html>, accessed November 10, 2012.

⁵⁴Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 34–35; and Caldwell, *Banned from Basketball*, chapter 7.

⁵⁵Kriegel, *Pistol*, 191, 197–99.

Maravich was, if nothing else, a legitimate star. “A loose-limbed, floppy-haired 6-foot-5-inch guard with sagging gray socks as his trademark,” as the *New York Times* described him, Maravich’s style combined with his seemingly endless ability to score to turn the LSU guard into a folk hero. He averaged more than forty-four points per game in college, leading the NCAA in scoring for each of his three varsity years. In an age when few collegiate games were televised, and even fewer for relatively poor teams with a relatively slim basketball legacy like LSU, word of his statistical triumphs spread largely without visual evidence, only shrouding his records in the cloak of mystery, making his play the stuff of legend. That legend, in turn, led to constant discussion, media profiles, and individual television appearances. Even before his massive contract, it was almost a fait accompli that Pete Maravich would arrive in the NBA as more than a player. He would arrive as a national sensation.⁵⁶

The Hawks began training camp in Jacksonville, Florida, on September 17, 1970. Not only did Maravich fail to perform well, Guerin also chose to include Herb White on the team, a white eighth-round draft choice from the University of Georgia; White made the team over other black players, heightening racial tensions. Training camp only drove the racial wedges deeper, with Walt Hazzard being the most rankled of all. (Hazzard’s spot as a more traditional point guard was threatened by the constant favoring of Maravich.) When the season started, White and Maravich became roommates on road trips.⁵⁷

Only exacerbating such problems, Maravich signed endorsement contracts with a variety of companies hungry for a white basketball star. He also turned down a leading movie role. The Hawks new advertising campaign touted the “New Hawks,” this despite the fact that the team was the league’s defending Western Conference champion. An all-white band played “Dixie” during warm-ups at 1970 home games. That summer, the Hawks moved to the weak Central Division of the Eastern Conference and assumed that even with the defections there was reason for optimism. But there wasn’t. The black veterans resented the highly

⁵⁶His 3,667 collegiate points in his three varsity seasons are far and away the most ever scored by a Division I college player. *Ibid.*, 167–80; and *New York Times*, January 6, 1988.

⁵⁷Kriegel, *Pistol*, 197–99.

paid Maravich, whose flamboyant passing and play only further exacerbated resentments about compensation. Meanwhile, the white southern fans were supremely devoted to the Great White Hope, who focused on entertaining them as a one-man show more than on playing as a member of a team. "He knew how to play one way," Guerin remembered. "His dad turned him loose at LSU, and that's the only way he knew."⁵⁸

That defending Western-Conference-champion Hawks team began the season 7–21, and Maravich was not playing well. That lack of success divided the team into the old guard and the new, essentially the black players and the white. Former North Carolina State player Hal Blondeau was shocked when he saw the Hawks play at Madison Square Garden that season: "It was four black guys and Pete. It was like he wasn't there. They just wouldn't give him the ball." Maravich was, wrote the *Atlanta Constitution's* Jesse Outlar, "as welcome as George Wallace at a Rockefeller house party."⁵⁹

While the wins no longer came easily, the economic bottom line was stronger because of Maravich. ABC's *Wide World of Sports* paid \$75,000 for broadcasting rights and added lights to Alexander Coliseum for the Hawks' season opener against the Milwaukee Bucks. Maravich did not play particularly well, but he was the reason for the show.⁶⁰ During the team's first two years in Atlanta, management could not sell its local broadcasting rights. During the 1970–71 season, the Hawks played on national television five times. Though the team was much less talented and successful than its predecessors, it sold out thirteen games. Attendance rose by more than twenty percent. Team revenues increased by more than fifty percent. "Without question," said Cousins, "I don't think there would be a new arena if we hadn't gotten Pete Maravich."⁶¹ The Hawks would have a late-season resurgence, finishing 12-5

⁵⁸Ibid., 193–94, 195–96, 200; and Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 35–36. George Preston Marshall's Washington Redskins had used much the same strategy, not playing "Dixie" at the games, but instead changing the words of Washington's fight song from "Fight for Old DC" to "Fight for Old Dixie." Smith, *Showdown*, 141. For more on the Redskins as a predecessor to the Hawks, see note 45.

⁵⁹"1970–71 Atlanta Hawks Schedule and Results," Basketball Reference, http://www.basketball-reference.com/teams/ATL/1971_games.html, accessed October 3, 2013; and Jesse Outlar, "A Year to Forget," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 8, 1971.

⁶⁰Peter Carry, "We Have a Slight Delay in Show Time," *Sports Illustrated*, October 26, 1970, 28–29.

⁶¹Kriegel, *Pistol*, 199–200, 210; and Frank DeFord, "The Hawks: Fouled Up But Flourishing," *Sports Illustrated*, March 8, 1971, 26–28.

with Maravich averaging twenty-nine points per game. The team lost in the first round of the Eastern Conference playoffs to the Knicks, four games to one. The team ended its first Atlanta season with a losing record—but attendance rose.⁶²

The Maravich saga was a very public demonstration of the racial issues surrounding the first NBA team in the Deep South, but it would not be the most public demonstration. The race problems inherent in negotiating the insertion of a black team from a black league into a white city for the purpose of gentrifying a downtown neighborhood would—perhaps inevitably—seep beyond the bounds of the local sports pages.

Upon purchasing the team in May 1968, Tom Cousins announced that he had no inclination to participate in basketball operations, “and I don’t think Carl is giving up his political activities. We’ll have the right man to run things,” he told reporters. “We didn’t buy the Hawks to make a lot of money.”⁶³ Cousins was right. Sanders had no intention of removing himself from politics and devoting himself to basketball, and in 1970 the former Georgia governor decided to run again for his old post. He had served as a racial moderate from 1962 to 1966 in a state that did not allow successive terms, so despite his popularity he could not run for immediate reelection.⁶⁴ Replacing Sanders as the racial moderate in 1966 was Jimmy Carter. Carter had refused to join the White Citizens Council as a young man and argued for allowing black worshippers to attend his hometown church; as a state senator, he stumped against restrictions on black voting. In the 1966 election he refused to exploit race as a political issue, even though it was the most pressing issue of the campaign. He finished a surprisingly strong third place to eventual winner and notorious racist Lester Maddox. Maddox’s victory represented a significant negative shift for a state that seemed to be moving toward racial moderation. Adding insult to injury, in 1968, the year the Hawks came to Atlanta, Georgia became one of the Deep South states (along

⁶²The New Orleans Jazz, the second Deep South NBA team, would mimic Atlanta in its approach, taking advantage of conflict in Atlanta to acquire Maravich and build its team around a marketable white player. Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 79; Kriegel, *Pistol*, 208–9; and Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 36.

⁶³*Atlanta Journal*, May 5, 1968.

⁶⁴“Two Pamphlets,” box III–4, folder 46, Carl E. Sanders Papers, Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens, Georgia (hereafter cited as Sanders Papers); and Coram and Tyson, “The Loser Who Won,” 62–63.

with Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas) that voted for former Alabama governor and infamous segregationist George Wallace in the presidential election.⁶⁵

The popular assumption in 1967 that Sanders would return triumphant in 1970 was undercut by the popularity of Maddox and candidate Wallace's surprising voter support in the 1968 presidential election. White Georgia had taken a hard right racial turn at precisely the time that its new black professional team arrived. In March 1968, 35 percent of Georgians believed integration was moving too fast. In April 1970, that number was 54 percent. Anti-black sentiment in Georgia stood at 10 percent in March 1968, at 49 percent in April 1970. Carter never left the public eye in the four years after 1966, fully intending to run again in 1970. He understood that he would need to oppose Sanders from the right in the Democratic primary. He could not, however, go so far to the racial right that he could not return to the center in the general election. So, the racial coding of his campaign would need to be subtle, the line he walked incredibly—and of necessity—narrow.⁶⁶

Carter's campaign was one of sound and fury; and though it had no significant policy consistency, it did signify something: white middle and lower class frustration. Carter sought to capitalize on white discontent against the wealthy, the city, potential scandal, or a potential black takeover. The campaign never actively decried the urban population, for example, but it clearly attempted to associate itself with those in white rural areas who did. Black voters were already supporting Sanders, so Carter could come to rural whites as a populist, with the inherent understanding that they would know the racial codes of that stance. He re-

⁶⁵Randy Sanders, "The Sad Duty of Politics: Jimmy Carter and the Issue of Race in His 1970 Gubernatorial Campaign," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76 (Fall 1992): 613–14, 615. For more on the Wallace campaign in the 1968 election, see Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1995); Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election that Changed America* (New York, 1993); and Stephan Leshner, *George Wallace: American Populist* (New York, 1994). For more on Maddox, see Bob Short, *Everything Is Pickrick: The Life of Lester Maddox* (Macon, GA, 1999); Justin Nystrom, "Segregation's Last Stand: Lester Maddox and the Transformation of Atlanta," *Atlanta History* 45 (Summer 2001): 35–51; and Bruce Galphin, *The Riddle of Lester Maddox* (Atlanta, GA, 1968).

⁶⁶Sanders, "The Sad Duty of Politics," 614–15, 617–20; Kenneth E. Morris, *Jimmy Carter: American Moralizer* (Athens, GA, 1996), 178–88; "Platform: Jimmy Carter for Governor, 1970," and "Analysis of Carter Platform," box III-2, folder 6, Sanders Papers; and Jimmy Carter Papers-Pre-Presidential, 1962–1976, accession no. 80-1, box 38, Sanders, Carl, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia (hereafter cited as Carter Papers).

corded a radio commercial where he promised not to be tied to any “bloc” vote, racial code for the black vote. Just to be sure he was not misunderstood, Carter slurred bloc so that it could be heard as “black.” His campaign also paid for radio advertisements for black candidate C.B. King in an effort to draw votes away from Sanders. “I expect,” said Carter, “to have particularly strong support from the people who voted for George Wallace for president and the ones who voted for Lester Maddox.”⁶⁷

Hawks players found themselves in the middle of this racially charged election. Early in the summer of 1970, the Carter campaign released a series of anonymous flyers designed to attack Sanders more directly. One featured Sanders being doused with champagne by two large black men. It was a photo common to those involved in professional sports. The Atlanta Hawks celebrated a division championship by pouring champagne over the heads of teammates, team personnel, and owners. Such was the shorthand of professional athletics, but Georgians outside of the city had yet to learn that language. The Hawks celebration picture became known as the “champagne shampoo.” The picture demonstrated Sanders’s wealth, his association with alcohol, and, most importantly, his association with blacks. The flyer joined others that highlighted Sanders’s connections with young, black state senator Julian Bond, the fact that Sanders had attended Martin Luther King’s funeral, and Sanders’s opposition to George Wal-

⁶⁷C.B. King was a veteran of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s Albany Movement and one of the few black lawyers in Georgia practicing outside of Atlanta. Betty Glad, *Jimmy Carter: In Search of the Great White House* (New York, 1980) 127, 128, 133, 135; Sanders, “The Sad Duty of Politics,” 615, 618, 621–22, 624–25, 628; Steven Brill, “Jimmy Carter’s Pathetic Lies,” *Harper’s* (March 1976): 79; “Won’t Forget Carter Tactics, Sanders Promises,” *Savannah Morning News*, 28 August 1970, 1, box III–1, folder 23, Sanders Papers; “Jimmy Carter Will Be Your Kind of Governor,” accession no. 80–1, box 23, Campaign Flyers, Carter Papers; “Jimmy Carter, September 23, 1970, Brochure—Gen Election,” accession no. 80–1, box 23, Campaign Platform 1970, Carter Papers; James Clotfelter and William R. Hamilton, “Electing a Governor in the Seventies,” in *The American Governor in Behavioral Perspective*, eds. Thad Beyle and J. Oliver Williams (New York, 1972), 34–35; Leslie Wheeler, *Jimmy Who? An Examination of Presidential Candidate Jimmy Carter: The Man, His Career, His Stands on the Issues* (Middlebury, NY, 1976), 53; “Carter’s Bitterness Taints His Credibility,” *The Macon News*, August 31, 1970, box III–1, folder 28, Sanders Papers; “Memo to: Jimmy Carter, from: Mike Kelly, re: Title IV—Civil Rights Act of 1964,” accession no. 80–1, box 25, Civil Rights Act 1964, Carter Papers; “Memo to: Jimmy Carter, from: Mike Kelly, re: School Desegregation,” accession no. 80–1, box 38, School Desegregation, Carter Papers; and James F. Cook, *Carl Sanders: Spokesman of the New South* (Macon, GA, 1993), 317–39.

lace.⁶⁸ It was an effort to use the Hawks—a symbol of black Atlanta—to convince white Georgia that Carter’s opponent was not an advocate of white interests. Professional basketball was in the same category as Julian Bond or Martin Luther King. It was not simply un-southern. The black sport was an affront to white values.

Ray Abernathy, a former vice-president of the Gerald Rafshoon Advertising Agency, credited the Hawks flyer to Carter press secretary Bill Pope. Another Rafshoon vice president, Dorothy Wood, saw the leaflet collected “in groups of several hundred or so in the office.” Gerald Rafshoon himself discussed it with Wood over drinks. The *Atlanta Constitution*’s Bill Shipp witnessed Pope passing out the flyer at a Ku Klux Klan rally. “A slightly-built fellow, his hat pulled down over his eyes, quietly circulated through the crowd passing out handbills,” wrote Shipp. “‘I don’t know what it is, but I bet it’s good,’ said one Kluxer as he grabbed a sheet of paper. It was a photograph of Carl Sanders being doused with champagne by a Negro basketball player.”⁶⁹ That Negro basketball player was Bill Bridges, who had arrived with the team from St. Louis and appeared at the Hawks’ introductory press conference in May 1968. The picture went not only to Ku Klux Klan rallies, but also to white Baptist ministers, barbershops, gas stations, police officers, and others.

The Carter campaign took measures to ensure that its hand in the distribution of the flyers would be hidden, though it was clearly responsible for it and other dirty tricks. The flyers bore a fake committee heading and came from a post office in Decatur; the campaign staff used postage stamps because a meter number could be traced.⁷⁰ “We distributed that leaflet,” said Abernathy. “It was prepared by Bill Pope, who was then Carter’s press secretary.

⁶⁸The Hawks flyer ploy was a revision of an old Gene Talmadge trick. In one of his gubernatorial campaigns, Talmadge hired a look-alike of his opponent and commissioned him to drive around the state with two black men. *Atlanta Constitution*, June 11, 1970; Sanders, “The Sad Duty of Politics,” 627–28; Morris, *Jimmy Carter: American Moralist*, 187; James Wooten, *Dasher: The Roots and the Rising of Jimmy Carter* (New York, 1978), 295; Steven F. Hayward, *The Real Jimmy Carter* (Washington, DC, 2004), 49; Reg Murphy and Hall Gulliver, *The Southern Strategy* (New York, 1971), 184–85; and Phil Stanford, “The Most Remarkable Piece of Fiction Jimmy Carter Ever Read,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 15 (July/August 1976): 16.

⁶⁹Glad, *Jimmy Carter*, 134–35; Victor Lasky, *Jimmy Carter: The Man & the Myth* (New York, 1979), 77–78; and Bill Shipp, “Stoner Visits Klan, Carter Gives Sermon,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 27, 1970.

⁷⁰Lasky, *Jimmy Carter*, 75–76.

It was part of an operation we called ‘the stink tank.’” Carter’s presidential campaign manager Hamilton Jordon masterminded the flyer with Rafshoon, Abernathy claimed. (Both Jordon and Rafshoon denied the allegation.) “Carter’s campaign financed [C.B.] King’s media advertising,” said Abernathy. “I personally prepared all of King’s radio ads while I was on Rafshoon’s payroll and supervised the production. And I helped channel money to the company Rafshoon used to pay for them . . . I don’t know if Jimmy knew about it, but everyone else did.”⁷¹ Attorney Charles Kirbo, Hamilton Jordon, Gerald Rafshoon and Bill Pope met most Sundays during the campaign in Room 232 of the Quality Central Hotel to discuss strategy, including “the race question.” “It was something we joked about in the office,” said Abernathy, referring to the Hawks flyer. “At the time, it seemed like a hell of a lot of fun.”⁷² “Oh, gosh, they were binding them in groups of several hundred or so in the office,” said Dorothy Wood. “I remember seeing several stacks of them. I had a fairly big office then, and I remember that they put several stacks of them in one corner of it for a few days.”

Though Carter denied involvement, Reg Murphy, former editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, was doubtful. “Mr. Carter has been quoted as saying how he didn’t know anything about the leaflet prior to its distribution. Technically, that might be true. But not philosophically,” he wrote. “He obviously was operating on the basis of ‘Don’t tell me about it; but get the job done.’ The fact is that Mr. Carter—even after he knew about the leaflet—never ordered his people to stop it. And he most certainly never apologized for it.”⁷³ Carter won the election and went on to become president in

⁷¹According to at least one account, Carter felt guilty about the tactic and called Sanders to apologize. Brill, “Jimmy Carter’s Pathetic Lies,” 79–80; and Wooten, *Dasher*, 295.

⁷²“The fiery, sometimes personal attacks launched by Carter against Sanders never alluded to race,” wrote the *Constitution*’s Bill Shipp. “But, mysteriously, thousands of leaflets cropped up all over the state in parsonage mailboxes, barber shops and beauty parlors, linking Sanders socially with Negroes.” Lasky, *Jimmy Carter*, 75–76; and Bill Shipp, “White Man’s Candidate: Despite Disclaimer, Race Was Big Issue,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 9, 1970.

⁷³In his 1975 autobiography, Carter argued that a vitriolic speech attacking the Atlanta press for making him seem like a rural rube was the reason black voters did not support him. “I was the only candidate who visited all the communities in cities,” he argued, “and who spent a large part of my time within the predominantly black stores, restaurants, and street areas.” Lasky, *Jimmy Carter*, 76, 78; and Jimmy Carter, *Why Not the Best?* (Nashville, TN, 1975), 103.

1976. The Hawks' appearance in the 1970 gubernatorial race—as the race-baiting pawn of a future president with a consistent track record of racial moderation—demonstrated the power of the black NBA image in the minds of white Georgians, many of whom were experiencing Sunbelt prosperity against their will.

In 1972, Carter oversaw the opening of the Hawks' new arena, the Omni. "Omni," ironically, is Latin for "every." It was a word of inclusion representing a symbol of gentrification. The building of the Omni itself, while suffering some initial delays in planning, progressed with the reasonable alacrity for which the NBA had hoped. Cousins, who funded the venture without public money, chose the design and broke ground in March 1971. It was ready the following year for the opening of the Hawks season on October 15, 1972. Richie Guerin had moved on, but Maravich remained. He scored twenty-eight points in a win over the Knicks.⁷⁴

As part of the development plan, Cousins built the Omni International, a massive office and convention complex near the arena. Opening in 1976, the International was part of the developer's attempt at reinvigorating the downtown area. Initially, however, it did not work. As the Hawks struggled and their arena remained mostly empty, so, too, did the complex associated with it. That season, the Hawks finished twenty games under .500 and had the lowest attendance in the league.

The team had two strong seasons in 1978 and 1979, but its first sustained success since the racial dismantling of the late 1960s began in the 1985–86 season. That team was led by the University of Georgia's Dominique Wilkins, who played his best basketball since being drafted in 1982. Wilkins was local, exciting, and allowed Atlanta's white fan base to root for a black superstar whose status as a former Bulldog was more important to them than his race. The previous season, Wilkins had won the NBA's slam dunk contest. In 1986, he lost to his teammate, the diminutive point guard Spud Webb. Wilkins, the former Bulldog known as "the Human Highlight Reel," led a predominantly black team featur-

⁷⁴Kriegel, *Pistol*, 219–20; *Atlanta Constitution*, March 30, 1971; and *Atlanta Journal*, March 30, 1971, October 16, 1972.



Tom Cousins's interest in the team was a function of his desire to gentrify his real estate holdings in downtown Atlanta. Building an arena was integral to that project; however, construction of the Omni suffered through several delays. The team played its first seasons in Georgia Tech's Alexander Memorial Coliseum. *Photo courtesy of the Associated Press.*

ing Doc Rivers, Kevin Willis, and Tree Rollins that helped make basketball more palatable to the city.⁷⁵

The following year, 1987, CNN moved its headquarters to the Omni International and the development changed its name to the CNN Center. The year after CNN's move, Sanders's original prediction finally came true: the Democratic National Convention came to the Omni to nominate Massachusetts governor Michael

⁷⁵Attendance was still poor compared to the more established teams in the league. Atlanta found itself in nineteenth place out of twenty-three teams. Still, attendance was more than one hundred thousand people higher than it was when the arena opened a decade earlier. "1976–77 Atlanta Hawks Roster and Stats," Basketball Reference, <http://www.basketball-reference.com/teams/ATL/1977.html>, accessed October 2, 2013; "Atlanta Hawks Franchise Index," Basketball Reference, <http://www.basketball-reference.com/teams/ATL/>, accessed October 3, 2013; "1985–86 Atlanta Hawks Roster and Stats," Basketball Reference, <http://www.basketball-reference.com/teams/ATL/1986.html>, accessed October 3, 2013; "Dominique Wilkins," Basketball Reference, <http://www.basketball-reference.com/players/w/wilkido01.html>, accessed October 3, 2013; and "NBA & ABA All-Star Game Contest Winners," Basketball Reference, <http://www.basketball-reference.com/allstar/contest.html>, accessed October 3, 2013.

Dukakis for president.⁷⁶ Thus the team whose residence in the Deep South began with racial politics surrounding its best player, Lenny Wilkins, finally found a measure of acceptance twenty years later with the absence of racial politics surrounding its best player, Dominique Wilkins.

There was, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a broader critique of the traditionally understood notion that sports was a character-building endeavor. Russell's autobiography in 1966, Harry Edwards's *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* in 1969, Dave Meggyesy's *Out of Their League*, Jim Bouton's *Ball Four* in 1970, and Jack Scott's *The Athletic Revolution* in 1971, each in its own way gave lie to the myth that sports was a cure to the ills of society. At the same time however, sports was also marshaled as a check against such countercultural messages by the likes of Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew, and Ronald Reagan. That check coincided with a rise of sports in the Sunbelt, as new cities in the expanding South and West sought to burnish their reputations with professional teams. In turn, those teams would, at least in the popular mind, take on the conservative values of those cities.⁷⁷

The Hawks' move to Atlanta initially problematized that transition by placing a black team from a black league into the heart of the Deep South at a time of significant racial unrest. Still, following a business model that played not to its employees, but rather, to the racial assumptions of its clientele, Hawks management steadily eroded the talent of the team in order to make its appearance more palatable to those conservative Sunbelt values. Or, as David Halberstam surmised, Atlanta's management, "anxious not to offend its white fans (or, more accurately, hoping to locate them), had broken up a very successful, virtually all-black team, and drafted Maravich out of college." That being the case, "Primarily for racial reasons, [Atlanta] remained a troubled fran-

⁷⁶There was a significant racial component to that convention, as white Atlantans expressed fear that Jesse Jackson and his cohort would spread divisiveness and might even provoke riots in the city. Nora Sayre, "Atlanta," *Grand Street* 8 (Spring 1989): 207–9.

⁷⁷Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2009), 240–42; Russell, *Go Up for Glory*; Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*; Dave Meggyesy, *Out of Their League* (Lincoln, NE, 1970); Jim Bouton, *Ball Four: My Life and Hard Times Throwing the Knuckleball in the Big Leagues* (New York, 1970); and Jack Scott, *The Athletic Revolution* (New York, 1971).

chise for a decade to come.”⁷⁸ But the simple fact that race was a mitigating factor in the Hawks’ demise demonstrated, as did the gubernatorial election of 1970, that it was not just the franchise that was troubled. Atlanta was situated at several fraught intersections: it was a city that wooed a successful professional sports team, only to ruin that success for the sake of race. It was a city that purchased a black team from a black league in order to gentrify a struggling black downtown area. And it was a city cloaked in a self-image laden with colorblind business-minded motives and a hunger for civic growth that was still hoping to build Margaret Mitchell Square Garden.

If that metaphor was a stand-in for a crumbling edifice that represented Old South values in the face of racial progress, decimated by hubris and ultimately bound to take the humble shape that modernity dictated for it, then Margaret Mitchell Square Garden is exactly what Atlanta got.

⁷⁸It is significant that Phoenix received an expansion team the year Atlanta bought the Hawks. Soon other Sunbelt cities like San Diego, Denver, Salt Lake City, San Antonio, Houston, and Dallas would have NBA teams as well. Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 79, 80, 148. For more on the modern outgrowth of the black image in the NBA, see Boyd, “The Day the Niggaz Took Over: Basketball,” 123–42.