On January 20, 1970, the National Basketball Association voted to expand. Along with Portland and Cleveland, an NBA franchise was awarded to a group of investors headed by Philip Ryan and Peter Crotty for Buffalo.

The age of sports expansion had been well under way since the late 1960s. The National Hockey League, for example, had doubled the number of its franchises from six to 12 in one grand move. The NBA had expanded to Seattle and San Diego in 1967; and to Milwaukee and Phoenix a year later. While some contended that the talent pool wasn’t there to support so many new teams, the NBA was eager for new markets in large part because it was at war with the rival American Basketball Association.

The ABA had been around since 1967 and was developing a strong following in some parts of the country. The ABA, with its distinctive red, white and blue ball, emphasized slam dunks and high scoring. The rival league was driving up player salaries and many owners in the older NBA were becoming increasingly concerned about the bottom-line. New teams to the NBA paid escalating franchise fees. In the case of the new kids on the block – Portland, Cleveland and Buffalo – the entry fee was $3.7 million.

Days after the announcement was made, it became apparent that the Buffalo group didn’t have deep enough pockets to operate a team at the most expensive rung of professional basketball. In looking back on the team’s checkered past, it was the first sign of trouble for a ballclub that would soon rank one day among the best in the league and in the next breath be spirited away from town in the most bizarre bait-and-switch move ever seen in professional sports.

Location-wise, Buffalo appeared to be a solid enough choice for NBA expansion. Even though its metropolitan area population was 1.3 million, the lowest of the new expansion cities, Buffalo’s economy was built upon the rock-solid basics that once made the Great Lakes such a vibrant area – shipping, hydro-
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Missed out on top talent their first season. (The Sabres were able to select scoring star Gilbert Perreault with the top pick and they never looked back in building their team.) The first four selections in the NBA draft proved to be bona fide stars. Lanier, the star from St. Bonaventure, went No. 1 to Detroit, followed by Rudy Tomjanovich (San Diego), Pete Maravich (Atlanta) and Dave Cowens (Boston). After that, the draft dropped off, so Donovan traded the franchise’s first draft choice to the Baltimore Bullets for guard Mike Davis. Davis had been on the NBA’s all-rookie team in 1969-70.

The team’s nickname, Braves, came from a contest with 14,000 entries. Dave Lejewski of Dunkirk had the winning entry and was awarded season tickets. Neither Lejewski, nor anybody else in Buffalo for that matter, was exactly sure what kind of team would be taking the floor at Memorial Auditorium. In the NBA draft, the Braves had the ninth pick in the first round. Unlike Buffalo’s new hockey franchise, the Sabres, the Braves missed out on top talent their first season. (The Sabres were able to select scoring star Gilbert Perreault with the top pick and they never looked back in building their team.)

The New York Knicks’ Eddie Donovan, who had played and coached at St. Bonaventure, was hired as the team’s first general manager. Besides being a great judge of talent, Donovan was also known as the guy who coached the Knicks the night the 76ers’ Wilt Chamberlain scored 100 points in Hershey, Penn. That still ranks as top individual scoring night in NBA history.

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The Braves had another pick in the first round – No. 15. Local fans clamored for the new club to take a chance on Niagara’s Murphy. Murphy had proven to be one of the greatest scorers in college history. But he stood only 5-foot-9. For that matter, there was another dynamic guard still available when it became the Braves turn to choose – Nate “Tiny” Archibald from Texas-El Paso. Yet as the moniker indicates, Archibald
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was stocked with rejects from other teams. Besides Hummer, the Braves’ original starting five included Herm Gilliam, Don May, Dick Garrett and Nate Bowman. The best player on the squad that inaugural season proved to be Bob Kauffman, a former first-round pick with Philadelphia. With the new team lacking in height, Kauffman took over the center spot, even though his natural position was forward.

Dolph Schayes, a one-time Hall of Famer for the Syracuse Nationals, was the coach. His expertise was talking up the team to the local media, which was important because the Sabres were already off to head start with the public.

But before the first season got underway, the team needed to add one more individual. When the Braves’ original investment group began to fall apart, the NBA approached Paul Snyder about taking over...
Early Monday morning at National Basketball Association headquarters in New York, the two men building the Buffalo Braves—General Manager Eddie Donovan and Coach Dolph Schayes—sat down and studied the players made available to them in the expansion draft.

When they glanced down at the "availables" from the Los Angeles Lakers and noticed the name of Dick Garrett, they agreed this was too good to be true. It had to be a big mistake. The Lakers certainly wouldn't risk losing Garrett—a starter, an NBA All-Rookie guard.

Or would they?

A hurried check was made. The Los Angeles list was correct, Dick Garrett was available.

Beautiful!

"This is a tremendous break for us," said the thoroughly delighted Donovan who probably will always remember the Lakers as the guys who played Santa Claus on Monday, May 11.

"Our first pick is Dick Garrett!"

Monday night Eddie Donovan Still hadn't gotten over his good fortune. "Dick Garrett is a great catch for us," Donovan said, in a tone that of a man who has just struck gold.

"He's a tremendous all-around basketball player: an excellent shooter, a fine defender, a guard that gets the things done."

The players sold basketball in the championship series with the Knicks. He was fabulous in the sixth game—the game in which the Lakers routed the Knicks to even the series. In that one, he was 8-for-11 from the field.

"Dolph and I can't understand why the Lakers shipped series with the Knicks. He was fabulous in the champi-

The time seemed right to try something different, like own a professional basketball team.

When the NBA called, the Braves had almost completed preseason play. While the team was the usual collection of cast-offs and misfits, it was easy to daydream about greater glory. Next season the team would likely have a top draft choice. Kauffman was somebody who has yet to explore the boundaries of his talent."

"Scott has been a pro for nine years, " Donovan said. "I'll never forget it. It was all very exciting, and that kind of convinced me. So, I bought the team."

On October 10, 1970, with Snyder as the team's new owner, the Braves played their first regular-season game. They opened at home against the Cleveland Cavaliers and 7,129 attended. The Braves won, 107-92. Garrett scored the first basket in franchise history and riveting gaze soon gained anyone's attention. In the spring of 1970, Snyder sold Freezer Queen, a frozen-food company, for a generous profit to Nabisco. The spring of 1970, Snyder sold Freezer Queen, a frozen-food company, for a generous profit to Nabisco. The spring of 1970, Snyder sold Freezer Queen, a frozen-food company, for a generous profit to Nabisco. The spring of 1970, Snyder sold Freezer Queen, a frozen-food company, for a generous profit to Nabisco. The spring of 1970, Snyder sold Freezer Queen, a frozen-food company, for a generous profit to Nabisco. The spring of 1970, Snyder sold Freezer Queen, a frozen-food company, for a generous profit to Nabisco. The spring of 1970, Snyder sold Freezer Queen, a frozen-food company, for a generous profit to Nabisco. The spring of 1970, Snyder sold Freezer Queen, a frozen-food company, for a generous profit to Nabisco. The spring of 1970, Snyder sold Freezer Queen, a frozen-food company, for a generous profit to Nabisco. The spring of 1970, Snyder sold Freezer Queen, a frozen-food company, for a generous profit to Nabisco.
mance and we drew well for the first couple of years because we cared, we tried, we worked."

Unfortunately, on the court, the expansion team was often overmatched. After winning the opener, the Braves lost their next nine games. Behind the scenes, Snyder was frustrated by what was happening on and off the court. What he, and the NBA brass, had underestimated was how difficult it would be competing against the other new pro franchise in town – the Sabres.

The two teams shared the Memorial Auditorium, an old barn of a building near the waterfront in downtown Buffalo. The Aud had been built in 1939 as a WPA project and plans were under way to raise its roof, increasing the venue’s capacity from about 10,000 to more than 15,500. At first glance, it appeared that both teams could prove to be winners in the standings and at the gate. But Snyder soon learned that the Canisius College basketball team regularly played on Saturdays at the Aud and the Sabres had Sunday evenings locked up. While Snyder considered Phillip and Seymour Knox, the Sabres’ majority owners, to be friends in socially,
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Mike Davis cuts to hoop between Rick Adelman and Leroy Ellis of the Portland Trailblazer during a first year victory in Buffalo. Traded to the Braves from the Baltimore Bullets, Davis a 6’3” guard averaged 11.3 points per game for the 1970-71 season.

Photo credit: Robert L. Smith

Mike Davis cuts to hoop between Rick Adelman and Leroy Ellis of the Portland Trailblazer during a first year victory in Buffalo. Traded to the Braves from the Baltimore Bullets, Davis a 6’3” guard averaged 11.3 points per game for the 1970-71 season.

Photo credit: Robert L. Smith

he later said “we didn’t get along in regards to playing dates in Memorial Auditorium.”

Snyder added, “To be a successful NBA franchise, you need to have a weekend playing date and we never could get that done. We were forced to play on Tuesday and Friday nights, which is the same night of colleges and high schools, and it was always a problem. We could never get a Saturday night because Canisius College had the Aud locked up. We were given five years by the league to straighten it out and we never could do that. “We had to provide a TV schedule, with a weekend playing date to the NBA. And we could never do that because the Sabres had Sunday and Canisius had Saturday. We tried everything to make a deal, but we were never able to.”

In an effort to help the new expansion teams, the NBA had doctoried the schedule so the new teams – Buffalo, Cleveland and Portland – played each other a dozen times. Eleven of the Braves 22 victories that season came against their expansion cousins. That may have helped the record, but it didn’t do much for the gate.
"Pistol" Pete Maravich of the Atlanta Hawks drives past Emmett Bryant of the Braves in his rookie season. Maravich wasted little time becoming a prime time player, averaging 23.2 points per game for Atlanta. However, NBA Rookie of the Year honors went in a tie to Dave Cowens of Boston and Geoff Petrie of Portland.

Photo credit: Robert L. Smith
In comparison, the NHL had quickly moved to a balanced schedule. Basketball fans only had a few opportunities to see such established teams as the New York Knicks or Boston Celtics. Hockey fans, though, had a healthy dose of the Montreal Canadiens and Boston Bruins.

“From the outset, there was a real difference between going to a Sabres game and a Braves game at the old Aud,” said Ken Weintrab, who worked the scorer’s table for the Braves. “The Sabres had the crowds and a rising star in (Gil) Perreault. They really had a buzz about them. With the Braves, the good NBA teams rarely came to town in those early years and the Braves themselves weren’t that good to begin with.”

By the second half of the 1970-71 season, the Sabres were selling out. In comparison, the Braves averaged less than 5,000 fans a game. Those that did attend soon singled out Hummer. While the rookie nearly averaged in double figures in points and rebounds, he proved to be no Calvin Murphy. The Niagara University All-American was already on his way to a Hall of Fame career in Houston. The Braves’ backcourt could have used some stability that first season. The best remembered guard was Em Bryant, with his distinctive headband.

The Braves never had a winning month and posted a sorry 6-34 record on the road. The highlights that first season proved to be few and far between. Kauffman, in his first start as a Brave, scored 35 points in a 134-118 victory over Atlanta on November 11. Buffalo somehow upset the Los Angeles Lakers 113-111 at the Aud 10 days before Christmas. But all in all, that was about it when he came to highlights. The Braves finished their first season 30 games out of first place, with 22-60 record.

“I decided we had to do better,” Snyder said, “and soon.”