

Roger Brown Finally Makes It To the N.B.A. — but as a Coach

By CARRIE SEIDMAN

Special to The New York Times

INDIANAPOLIS, Feb. 13 — As a teen-ager at Wingate High School in Brooklyn 20 years ago, Roger Brown dreamed of becoming a star in the National Basketball Association. And after a scandal that caused him to be blacklisted from the league, after an outstanding career with the Indiana Pacers of the American Basketball Association, after working in a factory and a car wash and at an assortment of other odd jobs, Brown finally made it into the N.B.A. last week. Regrettably, the opportunity came when he was 37 years old and his playing days were over.

Brown has been named an assistant to Coach Bob Leonard of the Pacers, now of the N.B.A., and he made his debut in that position in Indiana's game against the New Jersey Nets tonight, a game the Nets won, 98-96.

"It's ironic to be going into the league as an assistant coach," said Brown before the game, "but I finally achieved a goal. The N.B.A. — that's what it's all about. It's just a shame I didn't get a chance to play there."

The reason Brown did not get his chance in the N.B.A. was not because he lacked the talent. After a high school career marked by a nationally publicized rivalry with Connie Hawkins of Boys High in Brooklyn, Brown, who had been heavily recruited, chose to attend the University of Dayton. As freshmen, both he and Hawkins, who went to the University of Iowa, were accused of having accepted favors while in high school from the late Jack Molinas, a former college player who had been convicted of attempting to fix basketball games. The favors, an indictment charged, were to be repaid by their throwing games when they became college players. Neither Brown nor Hawkins was found guilty of any wrongdoing, but both dropped out of college and they were blacklisted by the N.B.A.

Career-Leading Scorer

More than five years later, the newer and more lenient A.B.A. accepted Brown. He signed with the Pacers in 1967, their first season, and had a successful nine-year career before the leagues merged in 1976. Brown is still the Pacers' career-leading scorer, and Jerry Harkness, a Pacer teammate then and a close friend who lives here now, still remembers him as "THE man on that club."

Five years ago, after Hawkins had reached a settlement with the N.B.A., Brown sued for a million and a half dollars and settled out of court. Earlier, before the merger, the ban was lifted and Hawkins got to play in the N.B.A. in his later years. But in the closing

years of his pro career, Brown chose to remain with the Pacers.

"I had an allegiance to the A.B.A.," he explained. "I wanted to keep my loyalty to the league that had put its faith in me. I guess if the contact from an N.B.A. team had been greater, I would have been very tempted. But I was in the latter part of my career, so nothing came of it."

Brown had good reason to feel gratitude toward the A.B.A. and the Pacers. After he left Dayton, he went back to New York, found he "couldn't make it there," after all the publicity about the scandal, and returned to Dayton where he worked "eight hours a day running an injector machine at General Motors." He said, "What it comes down to is that I died and came back to life in the A.B.A."

'It Was All Taken Away'

"There I was, one of the most sought-after players in the country and it was all taken away," he said. "I never considered myself doing anything wrong in the first place. In my case the favors amounted to about \$80 in lunches, the loan of a car, hot dogs, things like that. Molinas never mentioned anything to me about throwing games: I was still in high school. When you're a kid, you're not going to think about what his motives are."

"It haunted me in a big way when it happened. You have to feel some sort of bitterness toward being ignorant. The A.B.A. gave me life. It was a breath of fresh air when I left that factory."

In turn, Brown gave the A.B.A. a breath of fresh air, with performances like scoring 53 points in one game when Indiana defeated Oakland during the playoffs in 1972.

After his last year with the Pacers, Brown hung around, running a car wash in Indianapolis and "struggling," according to Harkness. Brown continued to work out with the team, give advice to the players and make speaking engagements for the organization.

'Never Had a Chance'

Harkness, who played against Brown while at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, said he would never think of Brown as "anything but a quiet guy, leery — the way guys are leery who grow up on the streets, in the ghetto."

"He never had a chance to prove himself not guilty," Harkness said. "I think he's always regretted not getting the recognition he felt he should have had. But despite the fact that he never played in the N.B.A., he's now a part of it for the first time in his life. And he's extremely excited about it."