

# Home especially sweet in NBA

A group of us is sitting around watching the Philadelphia 76ers play the Trail Blazers at Portland a couple Friday nights ago. The game marks a rematch of the National Basketball Association final series last year. But this is early regular season action and none of us are too uptight about the outcome.

Nobody except one vehement Sixer fan.

He sits watching intently. He praises the 76ers, calling them a team with more potential than any club in the league's history. He's in awe of the moosish Darryl Dawkins; he enjoys the graceful moves of Julius Erving and Doug Collins and aggravates himself over the play of George McGinnis and Lloyd Free.

I sit observing this devoted Sixer fan, who sports a well-groomed red beard, and think to myself—the NBA season is long and grueling and to get worked up this early in the year is ridiculous.

But if this guy doesn't realize it, or if he does and can't agree, that's his problem. I just figure his beard will turn gray by the All-Star break.

Portland ended up beating Philadelphia, 98-94.

To win on the road in the NBA is a proven feat. A feat that yearly is becoming more and more difficult. If Home Sweet Home isn't the slogan of every pro basketball team, it should be.

No less than 81 per cent of games

played in the NBA this season, which is approaching the one-month mark, have been won by the home team.

So regardless of how good a club may be—as even the 76ers, noted for their talented skyjumping flying circus, found out—it's not stable in enemy territory.

The Sixers ran into trouble early this year, winning only two of their first six games. Owner Fitz Dixon said he wouldn't stand for such nonsense. He fired coach Gene Shue and hired former 76er star, the ever popular Billy Cunningham.



Neil Rudel

But even Billy C. may have his sorry moments, taking a spot that some have called a hopeless situation.

Like top guard Doug Collins. "I had hoped for a nice, smooth season with no controversy," Collins told the Associated Press before Shue got his walking papers. "But it's just not possible with our team. There's no way of keeping every guy on our team happy."

"Hey, I don't envy Gene's job at all," he added. "Coaching this team borders on the impossible."

Meanwhile, Cunningham has led the Sixers to two straight victories, including a 30-point slaughtering of the Denver Nuggets, last year's Midwest Division King.

Elsewhere in the Atlantic Division, the revitalized, Willis Reed-led New York Knicks have grabbed the early division lead. Rookies Glen Gondezick and Ray Williams, brother of Seattle's Gus, have ignited the spark to a team that was on the decline the last two years.

The only other surprise in the Atlantic is Boston. The Celtics are hurting. John Havlicek is apparently running out of steam and even he can't carry a team forever. They have lost seven of eight games and signs point to an off Boston year, its first since Marvin Barnes was a good boy.

In the Central Division, the Atlanta Hawks—don't ask how—lead the pack. Cleveland, which appears to have benefitted greatly by the acquisition of Walt Frazier, has also jumped off to a good start. However, the Cavaliers' rivals, Houston and Washington, haven't yet found the winning combination. It shouldn't take long until they do.

In the Midwest, the Chicago Bulls have picked up where they left off last year. The Bulls were the hottest team

in the league down the stretch. Thanks to the offensive splurge of Artis Gilmore, the Bulls are on top of the Midwest.

But stalwarts Denver and Detroit along with the youthful Milwaukee Bucks—who have rookies Marques Johnson and Kent Benson—are close behind.

Out West, Portland can acknowledge Benson for its big lead in the Pacific Division and for the downfall of the Lakers, the preseason favorites. If rookies are intimidated by old pros, Benson is an exception.

He and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar got into a tussle in the very first regular season game. It started with a couple Benson elbows and ended with a Jabbar right hook.

Only the wrong guy fell. Jabbar broke his right hand and, for his efforts, was fined \$5,000—the largest fee on a player in NBA history—by commissioner Larry O'Brien. Benson danced back into his corner.

Without Kareem, the Lakers are sunk.

The Blazers, with Bill Walton, Maurice Lucas, Lionel Hollins and perhaps the NBA's best fast break, have zoomed out to seven wins in eight starts.

But the season is young and a lot is bound to happen between now and playoff time.

So don't go berserk yet. Worrying this early will only get you gray hair and, in some cases, a gray beard.

## Shue's refusal to be a yes-man cost him job

By The Associated Press

Gene Shue was fired as coach of the Philadelphia 76ers because of a meddling owner, F. Eugene Dixon, who felt the club was not being handled properly, and because Shue, a professional basketball man, would not cater to that owner's whims.

"When I bought the 76ers," said Dixon, "I knew myself well enough to know that I would be an en-

thusiastic, spontaneous, outspoken and occasionally obstreperous fan."

All of which Shue could put up with. But when Dixon started meddling in the way the team was being run, that was another matter.

As the season wore on and the clubhouse squabbling among the Sixers spilled into the local press, creating something of a daily soap opera on the sports pages,

Dixon became more irritated. After a midseason slump Shue's job hung by a slender thread, but the club started winning and no change was made.

But Shue's coaching ability was not the problem. Shue would not be a yes-man for Dixon, would not say the things a millionaire likes to hear, would not massage his ego.

So he was fired.

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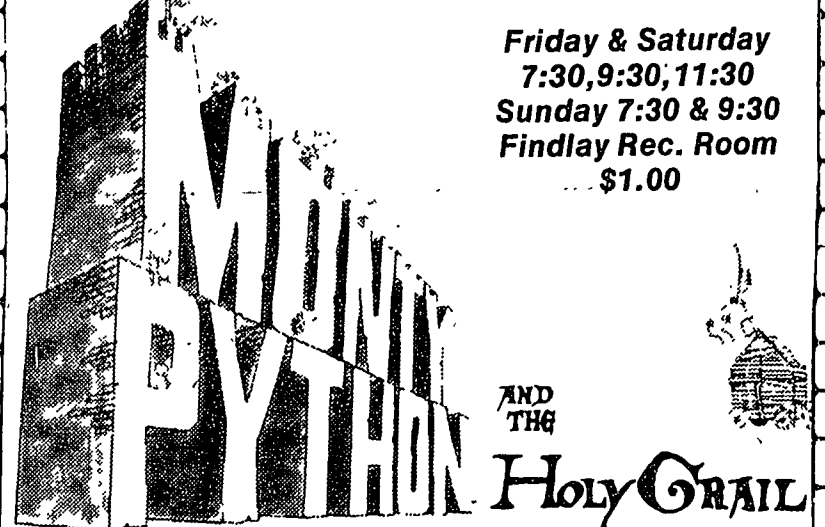


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