

The Seattle Times

Monday, June 1, 2009 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

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Sonics are gone, but 1979 title memories remain

By Percy Allen
Seattle Times staff reporter

Has it really been 30 years?

The Sonics captured the NBA title and won the city's first major sports championship exactly three decades ago today, and for some, Seattle's 97-93 victory against the Washington Bullets on June 1, 1979, feels something like a dream. Not quite real, yet strangely familiar.

"It doesn't seem like 30 years, but it doesn't seem like last week, either," said Hall of Famer Lenny Wilkens, who coached the Sonics to a championship. "Certainly time flies, and it was a great, great time.

"It's a great moment in the history of Seattle sports. To win a championship and to see how enthusiastic the fans were at that time. How they supported the team, it's a great memory."

Back then they were known as the SuperSonics, and they wore a green and gold logo featuring the city's skyline and the iconic Space Needle. Today, that team is called the Thunder and it plays in Oklahoma City, which proves so much can happen in one year, let alone 30.

Former Sonics general manager Zollie Volchok, 92, clearly remembers the series-clinching win in Washington, D.C., that sparked a three-day celebration in Seattle capped by a parade along First Avenue.

He described the relationship between Seattle and the Sonics as an "unbridled love affair because we had a bunch of guys that were very approachable for the fans."

"It's never that easy to win a championship, and when you do, you want to savor it," Volchok said. "Certainly we had a great team, and when I say great team, I mean the guys that really worked hard and worked together."

In Seattle, Fred Brown, Gus Williams, Dennis Johnson, John Johnson, Jack Sikma, Lonnie Shelton and Paul Silas were local legends, but the Bullets had brighter stars in Elvin Hayes and Wes Unseld. Plus, they were the reigning NBA champions after beating the Sonics 4-3 in the Finals the previous year.

The rematch, however, wasn't a contest. The Sonics lost the first game in the nation's capital 99-97 before taking the next four games.

"Even though we returned with the same team from the year before, they improved more than we did and, truth be told, they had the better team," said Greg Ballard, a former Bullets reserve forward. "They came back with revenge in their minds."



AP FILE 1979

Celebrating the title-clinching win, from left: assistant coach Les Habegger, head coach Lenny Wilkens, and Fred Brown and Dennis Johnson.

The next year, the Sonics lost in the Western Conference finals to the eventual champion Los Angeles Lakers, and Seattle's title team slowly began to dissolve.

Throughout the years, several championship-contending reincarnations emerged.

The Sonics returned to the Finals in 1996, which rekindled the spark between the city and its NBA team. But the good times didn't last long, and a red-hot team that averaged 54 wins during nine full seasons in the 1990s turned cold and averaged 53 losses during its last three years in Seattle.

Volchock believes the NBA will come back some day.

"If I were to make a guess, it's about 4 to 5 years down the road," he said.

Wilkins also thinks the NBA will return, but only if there's a state-of-the-art, multi-purpose arena available. He said the league still values Seattle despite the acrimony between commissioner David Stern and local elected officials.

"No one has forgotten what this city and that team had," Wilkins said. "Something that special never dies."

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