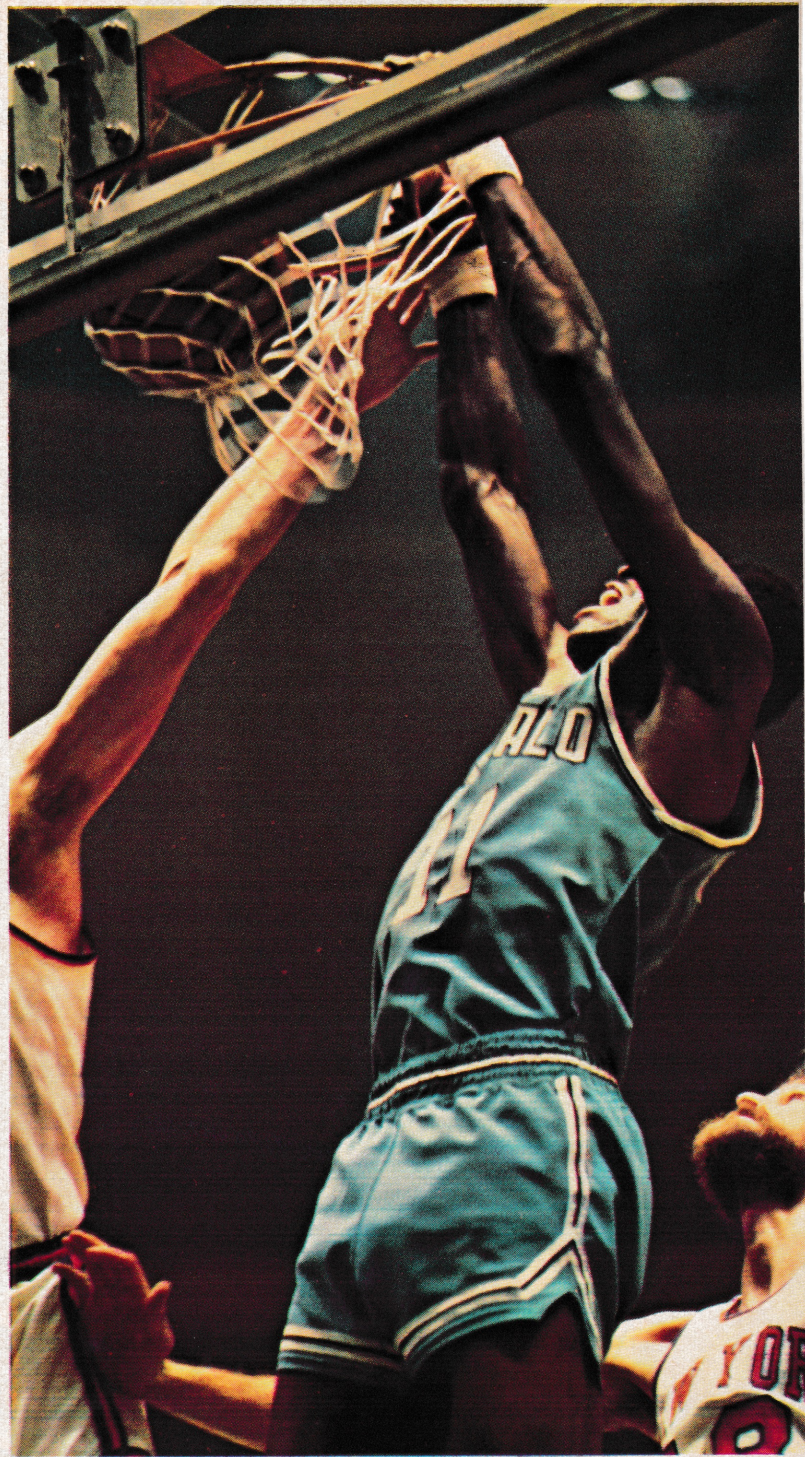
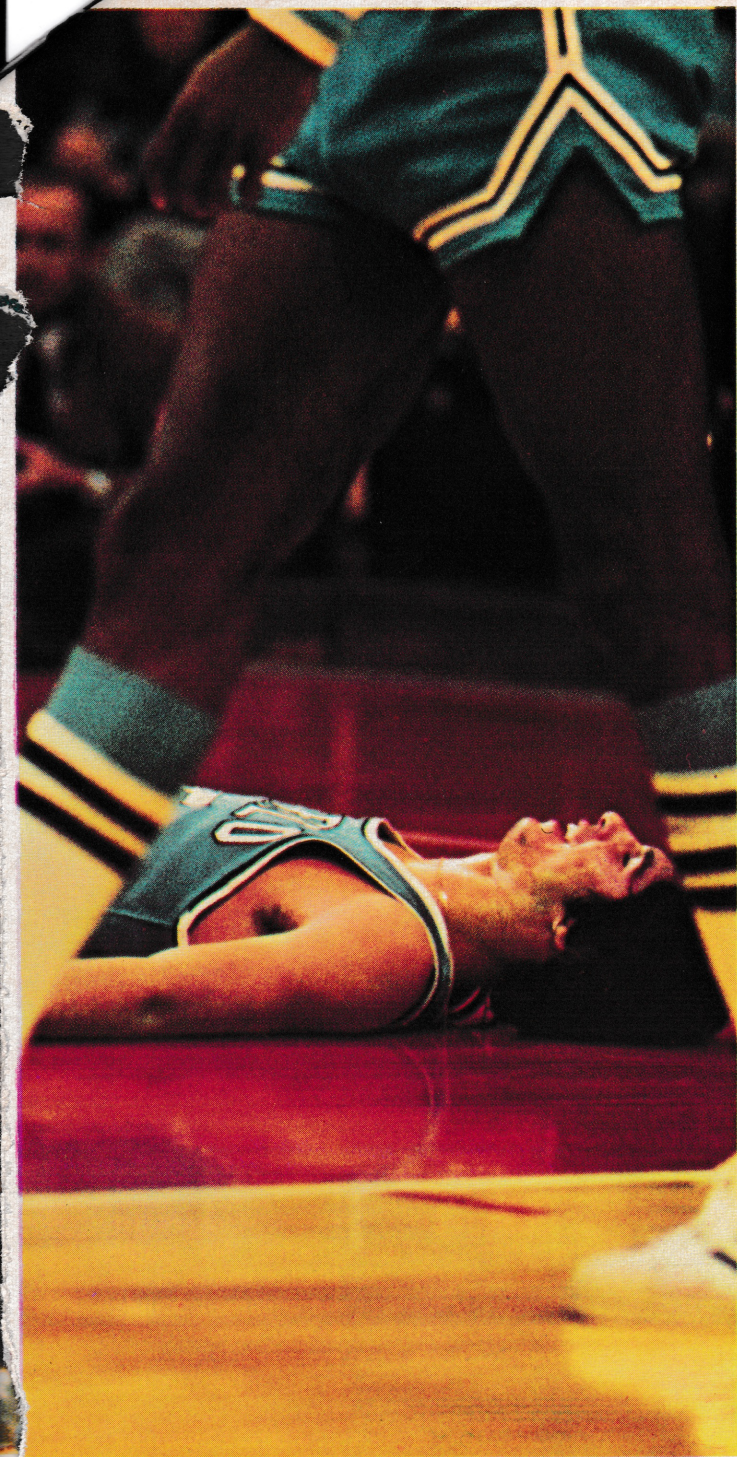


# Buffalo Builds BY JEFF GREENFIELD A Basketball Team



**T**hose of us who live in the giant coastal cities of the United States have a fixed notion of professional basketball. It is the clockwork perfection of the New York Knickerbockers: DeBuschere's determination, Frazier's liquid grace, Reed's strength. It used

to be the Los Angeles Lakers' blend of Chamberlain's intimidation, West's genius and Goodrich's shooting eye. It is burgundy Rolls-Royces, a packed house of celebrities, thinkers and the social elite scrambling for tickets, a living symbol of America's feverish capacity

to endow a boy from our meanest streets with wealth and fame if he possesses the capacity to stir our jaded sense of joy.

All this is true. So, too, is the world of professional basketball as it is lived north of the island of Manhattan and east of the San Andreas

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Fault. It is, most often, a world of dreary municipal arenas heavy with the silence of empty seats, a world of proud men struggling against the enemy of inexperience, hoping for a season in which they win as many games as they lose—hoping, in harsher words, for mediocrity. It is a world of sullen hours in airports, awaiting rare flights to and from cities out of the mainstream, a world where the past is a painful memory, and the present is made more endurable by dreams of the future.

It is, among other things, the world of the Buffalo Braves.

The Braves were born in a fertile burst of the National Basketball Association, seeking to expand the reach of their jurisdiction to new cities, sweetening the pot for network television rights and shutting off potential power bases for the rival American Basketball Association. The Braves began with a millionaire owner whose real dream was a National Football League franchise, a general manager fresh from the molding of the New York Knicks into a championship basketball team, a city whose low self-esteem was boosted by its inclusion in the circle of major-league cities, and a group of ballplayers whose chief distinction was their relative inability in the eyes of the established clubs.

The result was a record of relentless consistency: 22-60 the first season, 22-60 in 1971-72, and 21-61 last year. Now, with undeniable talent, both on the court and in the front office, the Buffalo Braves are slowly moving from laughability through respectability on their way to full-fledged contention. It is a long, wearisome journey, with frequent, painful reminders that overnight success is not found outside the realm of Busby Berkeley.

"I always wanted to own an NFL

team, and I was becoming increasingly frustrated," recalls Paul L. Snyder, owner and president of the Braves. The short, stocky, combative millionaire—he founded Freezer Queen, Inc., the largest frozen-meat processor in America—is sitting in a plush lounge inside Buffalo's Memorial Auditorium. "About that time, the New York owners of the Braves got caught in the recession, and the other factors looked good—the tax treatment and so forth. So the day before the 1970 season started, I took over."

Snyder was unhappy with his treatment at the hands of the NBA's elders. "Part of my agreement was that I would get \$1.1 million from the ABA as part of the merger settlement," he recalls, wryly. "I thought it would help provide money for rookies." He has been critical of much of the NBA's policies, ranging from the league's approval of Spencer Haywood's jump to Seattle (the Braves would have had draft rights to Haywood had he not first joined the ABA before his college class graduated) to the officiating.

"In the first two years, I expected bad seasons," Snyder says, "but last year, we had high-priced rookies and I was really disappointed. I felt that our players weren't playing like they should have. If we won, it was almost accidental. This year, you can see the difference. We're moving."

This year's Buffalo Braves clearly have talent, talent for the long-term. Buffalo is the youngest team in the NBA, and its elder statesman, the only surviving member of the 1970-71 squad, is 27-year-old Bob Kauffman, three-time All-Star forward and center. With seven-foot, \$2.1-million-contract-holder Elmore Smith now in Los Angeles, starting at center is six-foot-ten Bob McAdoo, a second-year man from North Carolina who has lifted himself among the NBA's top five in

scoring, field goals, field-goal percentage, rebounds and blocked shots. In Jim McMillian, acquired from the Lakers just before the start of the season, Buffalo got a 25-year-old small, quick forward whose leadership abilities suggest a younger smaller Willis Reed, a player with the poise and calm to settle a young, impatient team. In Gar Heard, acquired from the Chicago Bulls, Buffalo has a forward with impressive rebounding abilities.

It is in the backcourt where experience counts most—the guards quarterback teams and establish the rhythm of play—and here Buffalo is long on potential and desperately short on experience. Randy Smith, a third-year player, is one of the fastest men in the league, and a fine shooter. The other starting guard, Ernie DiGregorio, came from Providence with a big reputation, a brilliant shooting and passing eye, and a virtually untested capacity for defense. DiGregorio's televised performances as a Providence College star and member of the U.S. basketball team that defeated the Russians last year earned him quite probably the largest contract ever signed by an NBA rookie—but that investment will take time to pay off.

An early season game in New York demonstrated in grim detail the costs of inexperience. The Knicks forced nine Buffalo turnovers in the first quarter. Worse, for Ernie D's first New York professional appearance, Knick guard Dean Meminger exploded for ten points in that opening quarter, leaving DiGregorio in a maze of picks and screens. "He looks like a visitor from Prairieville, Indiana, trying to catch a subway in the rush hour," one courtside wag said of Ernie D, and Meminger added insult to injury by ending the period with a behind-the-back pass to Frazier—a kind of wicked parody of DiGregorio's fancy passing tactics.

By the end of the game, the Knicks had a 117-91 rout, Buffalo had committed 32 turnovers, and Meminger had scored a career high 27 points. And Ernie D had a derisive nickname: Ernie No-D.



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"It was tough to leave New York, especially after seeing an NBA title. But Buffalo gave me more money, a piece of the club, and besides, the challenge was there."

Eddie Donovan, the Braves' general manager since the club's birth, spent three-and-a-half years coaching the Knicks, and six as general manager. With Red Holzman, Donovan is credited with acquiring, through draft choices and trades, the nucleus of New York's first championship club: Frazier, Bradley, Reed, Barnett and DeBusschere. Then, shortly after the 1970 playoffs, Donovan left for Buffalo.

"What we have now are talented kids," Donovan says. "I would very much like to have an established, older guard who can give us 20, 25 minutes. But they're hard to come by. We're asking Ernie to quarterback this team—the only other guy who ever had that responsibility his first year was Oscar Robertson, and he had a team full of experience. It takes time for poise to develop. Don't forget, this team can be together seven years. But it has to happen one step at a time."

In late December, the Braves begin a grueling three-games-in-three days stint by playing host to the Knicks. The crowd is pretty good, a little over 10,000 (about 1000 above average). Still, it is unsettling for a frequenter of Madison Square Garden to hear lucky numbers read off, with free tickets and restaurant dinners being awarded at random.

The game itself demonstrates Buffalo's growing ability. With Ernie D passing sharply and McAdoo scoring, the Braves lead, 62-55, at halftime. The question is whether Buffalo's impatience and inexperience will eat away at that lead.

Late in the third quarter, with Di-

**Randy Smith, above, and Gar Heard both have first-rate NBA skills but are overshadowed by more famous teammates.**

Gregorio in foul trouble, with Buffalo going cold, the Knicks tie the score, then race to a seven-point advantage. Ernie D fouls out with almost two minutes left in the quarter.

And then the script changes. With the Knicks being called for fouls at almost every turn, Buffalo moves ahead with about five minutes to go. The Knicks never catch up. It is the first Buffalo win against the Knicks all year.

After waking up at dawn under a bleak, freezing sky to catch a 7:55 a.m. flight from Buffalo to Chicago; after walking approximately four miles through O'Hare airport to catch a flight to Kansas City; after a chance meeting with the ABA's Kentucky Colonels, rushing to catch their own flight somewhere (sports figures pass through O'Hare airport like penitents on different roads to the shrine of the week), the Braves land at a Holiday Inn. Coach Jack Ramsay sits in the coffee shop, talking about his team.

Ramsay is a tall, good-looking man whose casual dress favors pastel turtlenecks and patterned slacks. He is an intelligent, good-humored man, who seems to enjoy conversation. (During game time the good humor and calm are replaced by a hyper-active style not totally appreciated by all his players.)

"In this league, so many of the games are close," says Ramsay. "The team that's behind almost always makes a run at the team ahead. You have to have enough poise and determination to win these games. Last year, you could just tell by looking into their faces during a time-out that we weren't going to win. This year, we're starting to develop the understanding, the poise, to win the close ones, but we're still losing games we should be winning."

The talk shifts to Ernie DiGregorio. "We need Ernie to run the attack and to set the pattern of play. For us to succeed, Ernie has

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to do that. It's a very heavy responsibility for any rookie to have. Also, Ernie has never experienced a lack of complete success. He's used to having the ball all the time. I don't mean shooting it all the time, but totally commanding the offense. Here you can't do that and win. I know he feels he would do better if he had a chance to do what he wants to do. And he would—but the team would suffer. I think Ernie's done a fine job for what he's been asked to do."

For Jack Ramsay, the 21-61 record of the 1972-73 Braves was painful. "It was a tough year, last year," he says. "I don't lose very gracefully. This year—we're shooting for .500. If we break .500, we'll make the playoffs. Can we do it?" He smiles. "It's possible."

The Kansas City Municipal Auditorium is a 40-year-old Art Deco faded structure. The concept of NBA basketball as a big-time entity is not given much reinforcement here; 45 minutes before game time, Ernie DiGregorio comes on the court to warm up, and he must wait while King James Pizza battles Rain-Flow Cutter.

The Braves begin well, but then the Kings move into the lead. Jimmy Walker is moving past Ernie D on defense with ease, and the frustrated DiGregorio keeps trying to make back the points he is giving up. As a result, he is forcing shots and in the first half he goes zero-for-eight from the floor.

By the time the third quarter ends, Kansas City-Omaha has an 11-point lead. In the fourth quarter, the Braves draw within two points, then fade and lose by ten.

Outside the dingy locker room, sitting on his Adidas travel bag, dressed in a red flannel shirt and baggy chinos, Ernie DeGregorio sits clutching a can of beer and staring down at the concrete floor. He has gone two for 15 and committed

three turnovers in the last three minutes; he does not look like a 22-year-old millionaire. There is nothing that can ease him out of that gloom which is all but visible.

Sunday is another travel day. Wake up at 6:15. Board the team bus an hour later. Fly to Chicago. Sit for almost three hours in O'Hare fitting six-foot-eight bodies into five-foot-ten chairs, because the plane to Toronto (where Buffalo plays ten "home games" this season) leaves an hour and a half later than the schedule says it does.

Bob Kauffman, the six-foot-eight, 27-year-old elder statesman of the Braves, is the team's captain.

"It's more frustrating this year because we never really had the talent before," Kauffman says. "Before, we knew that if we played as well as we could, maybe we'd be competitive. Now we know that if we play our game, we'll win. But we're beating ourselves too often. We don't really take our time and attack the other team. We just throw the ball up. We're not all pulling together—on the court, I mean. Off the court, our attitude with each other is super."

In a coffee shop in O'Hare terminal, Ernie DiGregorio is wolfing down a breakfast of five scrambled eggs, bacon, and two large orange juices. His dissatisfaction with his performance the night before is obvious. "Of course it gets to me," he says. "I'd be lying to you if I told you differently. I'm not playing well on defense, and the pattern of play is very different. Here the forwards go down and set up on either side of the basket, and we try to run a play. There's no freelancing when you're going down and setting up. And I just play better when I freelance."

But doesn't this all take time? Can you really expect to play all that well three months into your rookie season? He shakes his head and grins. "I expect an awful lot of my-

self when I play.

"The toughest part of all is learning to fight through the picks," Ernie continues. "This summer I ran into Red Auerbach, and asked him what I should work on. He told me my balance is good, my shooting's okay, but I have to worry about screens and picks." He laughs. "That Auerbach knows something about this game. But sometimes it's just impossible. If a six-foot-seven guy sets a pick, there's just no way I'm gonna be able to fight through it."

Toronto is a hockey town. The ice is separated from the basketball floorboards only by thin flooring with little insulation. The 7000 fans who have showed up this freezing Christmas weekend are interested, but the knowledgeability is lacking. ("Hey," says a Toronto newsman, "what's that clock with '24' on it?")

In the first half against the Capital Bullets, Bob Kauffman and Jim McMillian try to coach Ernie D on shutting off the drive, but their success is mixed. "Right! Right! Right, Ernie!" Kauffman shouts, but Ernie goes for Archie Clark's fake left, and Clark cuts right for an uncontested five-foot shot.

"Left, Ernie, left! I got right!" McMillian shouts a few minutes later, but Phil Chenier gets free to the left for a baseline jump.

In the second half, the airplanes, the hotels, the waits, all come together, and Buffalo collapses. The Braves start throwing the ball away, shooting miserably. Buffalo loses, 110-85. Ernie D has gone five for 18 from the floor, Buffalo's whole backcourt has 22 points (50 for Capital), and the team has committed 22 turnovers.

"I just knew this was going to happen," McMillian says after the game. "The whole second half I felt like I was running, but I just couldn't run fast enough."

That may be the story of Buffalo this season. Unlike their earlier years, they have the capacity to run with the best teams in the league. But too often, they are running only in spurts, a young team still waiting to come together, to move into playoff contention. ■