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How Much Do Bench Players Matter in the NBA? A Case Study of the Seattle SuperSonics/Oklahoma City Thunder[1]

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Abstract: The National Basketball Association offers only 150 starting spots to the best basketball players in the world—five on each of the 30 teams it consists of—and, considering such factors as personal preferences, luck and salary cap, it is possible that a bench player on one team would be not so much a starter, but one of the two-three best players on a different one. This article analyzes two basketball players, Detlef Schrempf and Jim McIlvaine, whose career narratives will be discussed have played for the Seattle SuperSonics, a franchise which eventually relocated to the state of Oklahoma and became the Oklahoma City Thunder. By narrowing the focus of this article to one franchise—as the Thunder are the extension of the Sonics—I want to highlight two issues. Firstly, I want to show individual involvement in sports history, how two players can shape the fate of a franchise. The fact that both were reserves before coming to Seattle highlights the importance of every personnel decision in running a team. Secondly, while it can be argued that such players may be found in the history of each of the other 29 NBA teams, Seattle/Oklahoma is significant because of the relocation that took place in 2008, effectively ending high-profile men's professional basketball in Seattle. Hopefully this article adds a new perspective to the scholarship already devoted to the issue, dealing with the depiction and the repercussions of the move.

Keywords: NBA, sports, relocation, Seattle, SuperSonics

The National Basketball Association offers only 150 starting spots to the best basketball players in the world—five on each of the 30 teams it consists of—and, considering such factors as personal preferences, luck and salary cap, it is possible that a bench player on one team would be not so much a starter, but one of the two-three best players on a different one (Deshpande and Jensen 51-72). There have been however numerous talented players who simply did not get the opportunity or the support necessary to develop their games. While there are some players labeled as "busts," who came into the league carrying great expectations, yet failed to make it in the NBA, it is safe to assume that there are no accidental players in the league. The two basketball players whose career narratives will be discussed in this article have played for the Seattle SuperSonics, a franchise which eventually relocated to the state of Oklahoma and became the Oklahoma City Thunder. By narrowing the focus of this article to one franchise––as the Thunder are the extension of the Sonics—I want to highlight two issues. Firstly, I want to show individual involvement in sports history, how two players can shape the

1 The following is a revised version of the chapter "From the Bench to a Starting Role (On a Different Team)" (pp. 45-59) from my book *The Sixth Man: A History of the NBA's Best Off the Bench* (2022), published by permission of McFarland & Company, Inc., Box 611, Jefferson NC 28640.

fate of a franchise. The fact that both were reserves before coming to Seattle highlights the importance of every personnel decision in running a team. Secondly, while it can be argued that such players may be found in the history of each of the other 29 NBA teams, Seattle/Oklahoma is significant because of the relocation that took place in 2008, effectively ending high-profile men's professional basketball in Seattle. The reason why I focus on Seattle is because of how the relocation to Oklahoma is emblematic of the influence that individual players can have on the fate of a franchise. As of today (2022), it is also the most recent relocation that took place in the NBA and by far the most publicized. Hopefully this article adds a new perspective to the scholarship already devoted to the issue, dealing with the depiction (Morris 31-42) and the repercussions (Scott) of the move.

While it would be unreasonable to blame the downfall of men's professional basketball in Seattle solely on the team's general manager's, Wally Walker's, infatuation with center Jim McIlvaine, the 1996 free agent signing may be considered the first step to the demise of the Sonics, just as they were turning around years of playoff futility, coming off a hard-fought 1996 NBA Finals series against the 72-10 Chicago Bulls. One bench player did not lead to the relocation of a franchise, however his signing did play its part in the process. The relocation itself however would not have been that big of an issue––after all, 20 other NBA franchises relocated up until that point––if it was not for Detlef Schrempf, previously a bench player, and his influence on establishing the identity of this Seattle team. While one bench player helped to elevate the team, another contributed to its departure. This article discusses the career narratives of Schrempf and McIlvaine, and their respective influences on the Sonics. Before both can be analyzed, a brief discussion of the relocation itself is necessary, preceded by the only other documented example of NBA relocation occurring because of a singular player, Pete Maravich.

Pete Maravich's Influence on the Relocation of the New Orleans Jazz

The main impact of an individual player on a displaced franchise usually occurs after the relocation, when a team wants to either cater to its new fanbase by bringing in a player with close ties to the region or simply trades for a big name to increase the team's marketability. Such was the case with the Vancouver Grizzlies, who traded the best player in their brief, six-year history, Shareef Abdur-Rahim, in 2001 for promising rookie Pau Gasol in order to establish a new identity in Memphis. Similarly, the Brooklyn Nets, prior to their 2012 relocation from New Jersey, were trying to trade for Brooklyn-born scorer Carmelo Anthony, and when that failed, acquired All-Star point guard Deron Williams. For both teams the moves were attempts at breaking up with their rather shameful pasts, as the Grizzlies amassed one of the worst regular-season overall records in league history, while the Nets were for the larger part of their 35-year stay in New Jersey a badly-run franchise, with fans rarely filling up the arena, even when the team went to back-to-back NBA Finals in 2001 and 2002.

A prominent example of a player who saved professional basketball in one city and led to relocation in a different one is Pete Maravich, a member of the NBA Hall of Fame. Dubbed "The Great White Hope," he played for the Atlanta Hawks and the New

Orleans Jazz in the 1970s. In 1968 the St. Louis Hawks relocated to Atlanta because of diminishing fandom—even though the Hawks were a good team, in the playoffs not more than 5,000 fans attended their home games. The two new team owners, Carl Sanders and Thomas Cousins, described buying the franchise as "replaying the debt to the city and state. Atlanta and Georgia have been good to us" (Trutor 4). Initially the Hawks were popular in St. Louis, but once the novelty wore off, in what would turn out to be their last season there, 1967-68, they would sell out their arena only once, for an exhibition game against the Harlem Globetrotters, despite the team reaching the Western Conference Finals. Coming to Atlanta, where sports teams were yet to integrate, posed a problem for the Hawks, who only had two white players on their roster. The (white) press was not interested in giving the Hawks sufficient coverage, devoting more room to baseball, soccer, and professional wrestling. Race would soon influence draft and trade decisions, and while the team was playing worse, its popularity rose once Pete Maravich was picked third overall in the 1970 NBA Draft.

Maravich had two qualities which should endear him to the fans in Georgia: he attended Louisiana State University, hence was seen by Southerners as one of theirs, and, maybe more importantly, was "a white player who performed like a black player" (Aiello 76). In order to accommodate Maravich, the team traded away disgruntled black players, who did not enjoy the same respect from the management as the highly-coveted pick. While the team struggled on the court, off of it the Hawks finally gained recognition. In Maravich's first season in Georgia attendance rose by 20 percent, revenue by 50 percent, and the team sold out 13 home games (Aiello 80). Still, four years later, Maravich was traded to the New Orleans Jazz, after arguments with his coach and teammates. The expansion Jazz, seeing the effect that Maravich had on a similar—Southern and predominantly white—fanbase in Atlanta, hoped for the same popularity and paid a hefty price for the player: two first round picks, two pick swaps, three second round picks and picks two and three in the expansion draft.[2] That way Maravich became the first player on the Jazz, fueling the narrative of a prodigal son coming back to his hometown (even though he was born and raised in Pennsylvania). Maravich's arrival did little to translate to the team's popularity, as it constantly struggled to even find an arena to play in and was forced to every year be on the road for a whole month during Mardi Gras. In 1979 the Jazz relocated to Utah, after five years without a single playoffs appearance.

That way Maravich—or rather the price that the team paid for him—remains the only player whose influence on the demise of a professional NBA franchise has been analyzed and documented. The difference between him and Jim McIlvaine is that he was a big-name player, a superstar, while the center was not a coveted prospect, but a reserve. Similarly to Maravich though he was a white player, whose presence itself caused a rift between black teammates and management. Seattle however did not have

2 Some notes on the terminology: each year the NBA holds a draft, in which teams acquire rights to the best college and international players, who declared themselves eligible for selection. The worst the team's overall record during a given season, the higher the chances of selecting a better player with the lowest pick—the first pick is the most coveted, then the second, etc. The expansion draft is organized when a new franchise joins the league and other teams make three players available for selection.

the same complicated relationship with race as cities from the Deep South, in which NBA franchises were established. That is why the whiteness of Schrempf and McIlvaine will not be analyzed or brought up in the article. The trading for/signing of the two players was not racially motivated, as they were acquired purely for their basketball skills.

From Seattle to Oklahoma

Established in 1966, the Seattle Supersonics (in 1969 the spelling of the name was changed to SuperSonics) were part of the city's rebranding "from a loggy old frontier town into a shiny technotopia of glass and light," which explains the futuristic name of the team (Anderson 27). Seattle paid $1.75 million to the NBA for the privilege of housing one of the five expansion teams, rounding up the total number of NBA franchises to 14 at the time. The 1960s were a time when pursuing a Major League team, either by relocation or expansion, was "a matter of government business," as was the case in cities like San Diego, Tampa, Phoenix or Atlanta (Trutor xix). Having a big league team presumably "legitimized" a city, with sports stadiums and arenas serving as designated places of collective entertainment. 13 years after the team was established (and 11 after completing its first NBA season) Seattle celebrated its first championship. The city would have to wait until 2014, when the Seattle Seahawks football team won Super Bowl XLVIII, for its team to emerge triumphant in a professional sports league again. Following the 1978 championship, the Sonics went to the finals a year later, but lost to the Bullets, and reappeared there only in 1996.

In 1983 the organization that paid the NBA slightly less than $2 million to be part of "basketball royalty," was sold to Barry Ackerley for $21 million. In the 1980s the team made the Conference Finals twice, but also failed to reach the playoffs three times. In the 1990s the Sonics became one of the more promising teams, impressing fans and experts alike with their high-flying, fast-paced offense and hard defense. Led by the point guard–power forward duo of Gary Payton and Shawn Kemp, and coached by George Karl, in the 1990s the Sonics were in the top three of the Western Conference teams when it came to the regular season record five times, but made the finals only once. In the year 2001 Howard Schultz bought the Sonics for $200 million. The founder of Starbucks was sold the team only after promising that it would stay in Seattle, and when he sold the Sonics to an ownership group of Oklahoma businessmen led by Clay Bennett and Aubrey McClendon for $350 million in 2006, he made them promise the exact same thing. However, just two years later they moved the team to Oklahoma City, which was their intention all along, following a series of leaked e-mails.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, the New Orleans Hornets' arena was only slightly damaged, but the area around it was completely flooded. League commissioner David Stern came up with the idea of temporarily moving the team to Oklahoma City, while New Orleans was healing from the wounds suffered from the natural disaster (Ritter Conn). The inhabitants of Oklahoma quickly embraced the Hornets, despite the team rebuilding, with a roster consisting of NBA journeymen like Speedy Claxton, Marc Jackson and Marcus Fizer, and promising, but still rather raw players like Chris Paul, David West or J.R. Smith. "Embraced" may actually be too small of a word to describe the enthusiasm with which Oklahomans welcomed their first

professional sports franchise, even though it was just temporary—the Hornets were 11th in attendance in 2005-06, while a season earlier, when playing in New Orleans, they were 30th out of 30 NBA teams in that regard.[3] As pointed out by journalist Jordan Ritter Conn: "OKC's arena was almost always sold out, and it became instantly notorious as one of the loudest places in the league." Furthermore, "attendance in Oklahoma City was far higher than it had ever been in New Orleans," (Anderson 41) which meant that the city made sense as a possible NBA location in the future, despite the small market.

Meanwhile in Seattle, the league and the owner were struggling to get government funding for a new sports arena. After Schultz bought the Sonics in 2001, they have made the playoffs only twice, and while Seattle was considered a basketball-crazed city by outsiders and Sonics players themselves, the basketball fandom there was fading. Ray Allen, who played for the Sonics during that time and was traded a season before the team moved to Oklahoma, wrote in his autobiography: "I'd always believed the Sonics would never leave Seattle, given such enthusiastic support from the fans at KeyArena. Turns out, those fans represented a relatively small sample size" (Allen 76). On the 7th of November 2006 nearly 75 percent of Seattle voters voted against using tax dollars to build a new arena for the Sonics, while on the 16th of February 2008 Oklahoma City voters agreed to a one percent sales tax that would be used to pay for the improvements to the city's own sports arena, the Ford Center, where the Thunder were supposed to play. The different results of both votes represent different attitudes of Seattle and Oklahoma City to owning a professional basketball team at the time of the relocation.

Former Sonics' players were clearly unhappy with the development. Team legend Gary Payton openly refused to have his jersey retired by the Thunder. On the 13th of April 2008 the team played its last game in Seattle. The fans chanted "Save our Sonics" throughout the whole event and after it was over, Payton said: "The simple fact is we want to try and save the team. It's not gone yet. Everybody has to try and buckle down in the next couple months and see what can happen" (Associated Press B6). Following the relocation, Detlef Schrempf, another key member of the Sonics' roster that made the 1996 NBA Finals, said about the Thunder: "There's nothing left from the Sonics, really. There's no tradition. It's a totally new organization, a different city" (Dwyer). Schrempf felt that team leadership and local politicians did not do enough to keep men's professional basketball in the state of Washington, where he has spent 10 years of his basketball career.

Detlef Schrempf

Schrempf's basketball career spanned for 22 seasons, four in college, at University of Washington, and 18 in the NBA. Schrempf played for six seasons for the Sonics, the longest he has been on one team during his NBA career, which also included three and a half seasons in Dallas, four and a half in Indiana, and two final years in Portland. Born in West Germany, Schrempf's primary love was soccer, but he quit after arguing with his coach and injuring his foot. At 13 he fell in love with basketball, despite such obstacles as being unable to find a basketball court or enough players to play pickup games, due to the sport's lack of popularity in his homeland (Wolff 47). Thanks to connections he

3 All statistical data provided by Basketball Reference, if not stated otherwise.

has made while playing basketball, he was able to spend one year in Centralia High, Washington, where he made such an impression on college coaches that he stayed in the U.S. and was recruited by the University of Washington. As a freshman he saw relatively little playing time, but during his second year the number of minutes per game he would spend on the court tripled. Capable of playing all five positions, the 6'10" Schrempf earned comparisons to Magic Johnson for his ballhandling ability. The player welcomed them, saying: "if I could choose, I'd like to play more like Magic. I get satisfaction passing the ball" (Wolff 47).

Schrempf joined the Dallas Mavericks, taken with the eight pick in the 1985 draft. In the same draft, with the 17th pick, the team from Dallas took another player from West Germany. the 7'1" center Uwe Blab. The expectations were relatively high regarding Schrempf. Sam Goldaper of *The New York Times* predicted that he should make an immediate impact on the team, as "his open-court game fits in with Dallas's galaxy of shooters: Mark Aguirre, Rolando Blackman, Derek Harper and Brad Davis, all plus-.500 shooters from the field" (Goldaper 10). Instead he found himself coming off the bench behind either Aguirre or Sam Perkins, the starting forwards on the Dick Motta-coached Mavs. Schrempf was named the starter for a total of 22 games during the three and a half seasons he has spent on the Mavericks. Blab started just one game during his four seasons in Dallas.

In his third season on the Mavericks Schrempf was playing fewer minutes per game than the year before due to the rise of another sixth man, Roy Tarpley, the second-year power forward selected with the seventh pick in the 1986 NBA Draft. The Indiana Pacers' GM Donnie Walsh acquired the frustrated Schrempf in the middle of the 1988-89 season, and the German was given a bigger role on his new team. The trade was made because of Tarpley, as the Mavericks needed a big man to fill in for their potential superstar while Tarpley was in rehab, as the player developed a drug habit. Schrempf was still coming off the bench for the Pacers, but his playing time increased. Coach Dick Versace moved him from small forward to power forward and the switch better suited his game. He started his first full season with the Pacers 15 pounds heavier, yet was able to retain his speed, passing ability and shooting touch (Hersch 36). He finished the 1989-90 season with averages of 16.2 points, 7.9 rebounds and 3.2 assists, all career-highs, while starting just 18 games. He lost the voting for the Sixth Man of the Year award to Milwaukee's Ricky Pierce by a decisive margin of 69 votes (77–8).

A year later though, Schrempf won the award while posting very similar numbers as the year before. The Pacers finished the season 41-41 under coach Bob Hill and were eliminated in the first round of the playoffs. In the 1991-92 season the team showed no improvement, winning one game less and again getting eliminated in the first round. Still, Schrempf was once more the recipient of the Sixth Man of the Year award. His best game of that season came on February 11, 1992 against one of the worst teams in the league, the Orlando Magic. Schrempf scored 26 points and grabbed 23 rebounds. He scored 20 or more points in 26 games and had the third-highest point average on the team, behind esteemed shooters Reggie Miller and Chuck Person.

Despite these achievements, the Pacers traded him to the Sonics for Derrick McKey, a younger wingman, whom new head coach Larry Brown wanted for his defensive abilities. Schrempf immediately became a starter and an important part of

the Sonics' roster. In the 1994-95 season, his second on the team, Schrempf was voted to the All-NBA Third Team, and a season later his team has made the NBA Finals, where the Sonics lost to one of the best teams in NBA history, the Chicago Bulls. Moved back to the small forward position, the German took some time to adapt to playing in the frontcourt next to explosive power forward Shawn Kemp. Coach George Karl immediately after the trade predicted that the Sonics were going to win a championship in two to three seasons and if not: "we'll be very, very disappointed" (Daily News Wire Services D1). A few months after the trade, Phil Taylor of Sports Illustrated wrote that "it was the acquisition of the versatile, 6'10" Schrempf that many observers believe may put championship rings on the Sonics' fingers" (Taylor 30). In the player's first five seasons in Seattle, the Sonics won at least 57 games. His last season on the team was one of rebuilt and turmoil, not only because of the 1998 lockout, which heavily impacted the whole league, but more so due to the departure of Shawn Kemp in the summer of 1997. The move was a consequence of a different management decision, one made a year earlier.

Jim McIlvaine

In the summer following the 1996 finals the team made one key acquisition, which would shape its future for years to come. Shawn Kemp was the Sonics' best player during their finals run, yet he was making just slightly above $3 million, due to the contract renewal he had signed in 1994. According to the collective bargaining agreement, which prohibited players from renegotiating their contracts three years after signing an extension, the contract was non-negotiable until October 1997. The situation caused a lot of grief and frustration for Kemp, who eventually demanded a trade after the turbulent 1996-97 season concluded. Interestingly, he signed the deal following an unsuccessful trade attempt which would see him change teams with another famously underpaid superstar. Kemp was so beloved in Seattle that when the team had the opportunity to trade him, Ricky Pierce (now a Sonic), and a first-round draft pick, to the Chicago Bulls for Scottie Pippen in the summer of 1994[4], the fans were so vocal against the move that it was vetoed by the team owner, despite the trade being already agreed upon between Karl and Jerry Krause, the GM of the Bulls. The Sonics did not have a GM at the time, as Bob Whittsitt, that season's NBA Executive of the Year, was fired after the playoff loss.

In the 1997 offseason Kemp was traded to the Cleveland Cavaliers, where he immediately signed a seven-year contract for $107 million, becoming just the fifth player in NBA history—after Juwan Howard, Alonzo Mourning, Shaquille O'Neal and Kevin Garnett—to sign a contract for $100 million or more. He got what he asked for—albeit on a different team—when he complained to the press before the start of the 1996-97 season: "When you play for seven years and you've proved yourself to be an All-Star, then you see guys who haven't proved themselves sign for millions of dollars, you have a right to be upset" (Cour), The interview was the consequence of Kemp

4 The decision to engage in trade talks was made following a disappointing playoff performance, in which the Sonics, first in the league after the regular season, were eliminated in the first round of the playoffs by the eight-seed Denver Nuggets. It was the first time in NBA history that such a thing occurred.

sitting out three weeks of training camp and missing five exhibition games. After the Sonics lost to the Rockets in the second round of the 1997 playoffs, Kemp said that he never wanted to play for the team again (Karl 208).

Although he stated otherwise on numerous occasions, it was evident that the reason for Kemp's frustration with the Sonics was the signing of reserve center from the Washington Bullets, Jim McIlvaine, by general manager Wally Walker in 1996 free agency. The Sonics' search for a center was one of need rather than want. When Shaquille O'Neal moved to the Los Angeles Lakers in the summer of 1996, teams in the Western Conference were forced to upgrade their center positions. By then teams were not necessarily built around a big man, but it was still the norm, and tall players were in high demand. The Sonics' coach, George Karl, characterized the situation as follows: "We hired the 7'1" McIlvaine to be our Shaq-stopper,[5] but the guy he stopped instead was his new teammate. Shawn Kemp resented Mac's seven-year $33.6 million deal, and I didn't blame him… Shawn would be making about a million less than the unproven new guy" (Karl 206-207).

The 32nd overall pick in the 1994 NBA Draft, McIlvaine had a rather pedestrian rookie year, playing less than 10 minutes a night.. He was the team's third center, behind the 7'7" Romanian Gheorghe Muresan and veteran Kevin Duckworth. Duckworth, the 1988 NBA Most Improved Player of the Year and two time All-Star was the starting center on the Portland Trail Blazers teams that have made the NBA Finals in 1990 and 1992. With his game continuing to regress—the process already began in Portland—due to a struggle with weight issues and injuries, Duckworth has spent only two seasons in Washington, before being traded to Milwaukee. After the 1995 trade, McIlvaine became the reserve center for the Bullets and his playing minutes increased. He did not show much improvement on the offensive end, finishing the season with 2.3 points per game, but it was his defensive skills that have made him such an interesting player for the Sonics. His 2.1 blocks per game average was good for ninth place in the league, the same as Shaquille O'Neal and better than Vlade Divac, Shawn Kemp or one of the best defensive centers in the NBA, Ervin Johnson. Johnson was a starter for the Sonics during the 1995-96 regular season, but was moved to the bench during the playoffs and the team decided not to extend his contract following his performances in the postseason.

Instead, the Sonics' management was impressed by a different player, whose team did not even make the playoffs, and he himself started just six games. During those six games, the last six of the season, against three of the worst—the Raptors (twice), the Timberwolves and the Celtics—and two of the best—the Magic and the Bulls—teams in the league, he was averaging 4.7 points, 6.2 rebounds and 5.2 blocks per game. In the last game of the season, against the eventual champions, McIlvaine had six points, nine blocks and 11 rebounds. The Bullets lost by 10 points, with the Bulls resting their starters (only Scottie Pippen played 30 minutes) before the playoffs. The statistics help to explain the allure of McIlvaine for a team in need of a defensive-minded center.

The contract was largely discussed even before McIlvaine played a single game for the Sonics, as he was considered overpaid, making more than such stars as Kemp,

5 Interestingly, team GM, Wally Walker, said: "We didn't get McIlvaine to be a Shaq-stopper" (Taylor, "Spotlight: Jim McIlvaine" 124).

Pippen, Karl Malone or Mitch Richmond. Phil Taylor of *Sports Illustrated* tried to be optimistic about the deal:

> if McIlvaine provides the interior defense the SuperSonics need to transform them from last season's NBA finalists into this season's champions, he will seem like a bargain. His 2.08 blocked shots per game ranked 10th in the league even though he averaged only 14.9 minutes, and his projected 6.67 blocks per 48 minutes was the best such mark in the league. (Taylor, "Spotlight: Jim McIlvaine" 124)

However, he concluded that: "If Sonics had been careful, they wouldn't have gambled on signing McIlvaine in the first place. Now they hope that, come June, they will be rewarded for their risk" (Taylor, "Spotlight: Jim McIlvaine" 124). A good shot-blocker and not much more, McIlvaine, somewhat predictably, failed to develop into a good offensive player, but, more importantly, he caused the aforementioned rift between Shawn Kemp and the Sonics. Kemp's frustration was visible on and off the court, as he led the league in fouls (320 in 81 games), was late for team flights and practices. McIlvaine had 247 fouls in 82 games, but he played just 18 minutes per game, which means that per 48 minutes he averaged 9.37 fouls—second in the league behind Felton Spencer of the Golden State Warriors.

Kemp was also benched for four games late in the season and was rumored to have a drinking problem (Baker). He was traded to the Cleveland Cavaliers, who acquired him and Milwaukee Bucks veteran point guard Sherman Douglas. The team from Wisconsin got the Cavs' Terrell Brandon and Tyrone Hill. The Sonics got Vin Baker, who, as it turned out, also had a drinking problem and would soon succumb to his addiction. The move started the decline of the franchise, despite a promising beginning—Baker made the All-NBA Second Team and the Sonics won 61 games in his first season in Seattle, but were eliminated in five games by the Lakers in the Western Conference Semifinals. McIlvaine, the center that was supposed to make the difference on the defensive end in such a series, was playing just 10.4 minutes per game, despite being named the starter in four of them. He made just five blocks and grabbed nine rebounds in total.

After the season the Sonics traded McIlvaine to the Nets and signed veteran Olden Polynice, the player that the team infamously traded away Scottie Pippen for on 1991 draft night. The center said about his predecessor: "No offense, but last year when that guy was on the court, Seattle was playing four-on-five. Anything I can add will be an improvement" (Weitheim 94). McIlvaine was often injured when on the Nets, playing more than 22 games in the season only once, and retired from professional basketball in 2001. The Sonics, despite being stronger at center, failed to make the playoffs for the first time in eight seasons. Baker regressed from 19.2 points and eight rebounds to 13.8 points and 6.2 rebounds per game. The team also got rid of head coach George Karl, whose contract was not extended. With Paul Westphal on the bench, the Sonics were able to win just 25 games in the lockout-shortened 50-game season.

Up until the aforementioned move to Oklahoma City, the team went to the playoffs only three times and only once made it past the first round. In a last ditch effort, the city of Seattle sued the ownership group, who was originally supposed to honor the last two years of the Sonics' lease of KeyArena and only then consider moving the

team. When the NBA Board of Governors approved the move prior to an actual trial taking place, the 2008 relocation was inevitable. The ownership group was forced to pay $45 million to the city which, according to Mayor Greg Nickels, "more than [covered] whatever rent the Sonics would have paid over the next two season and [allowed] the city to retire the debt on previous renovations made to KeyArena" (Lynn and Williams A6).

Conclusion

What happened to the Sonics stands in opposition to the situation on a different team that Schrempf played for, the Blazers, who around the same time as the Sonics were also dealing with their share of issues. The Blazers were the only NBA team in Oregon, the neighboring state of Washington, where the Sonics were the sole NBA team. The close proximity of both teams led to a rivalry between small market teams, which historically stands at 98-94 in favor of the Sonics. Around the same time both teams were going through periods of disappointment, but the Blazers had an owner—Paul Allen—who simply could afford to keep the franchise competitive and safe, despite the image issues which led to his team being nicknamed the "Jail Blazers."

In Schrempf's first season there, 1999-2000, Portland had the deepest roster in the NBA, as the bench players on that team (Jermaine O'Neal, Brian Grant, Schrempf, Bonzi Wells, Greg Anthony) would have easily been starters on other teams in the league. The Blazers had the highest salary in the league ($73.9 million), more than double of the $34 million salary cap. The starters (Arvydas Sabonis, Rasheed Wallace, Scottie Pippen, Steve Smith, Damon Stoudamire) themselves were earning more than full rosters of 25 teams in the league. In the 2000 playoffs the Blazers made it to the Western Conference Finals, but in the next three seasons would be eliminated in the first round of the playoffs, before missing out on the postseason completely for the next five years. In the years when they made the playoffs the Blazers were consistently placing in the league's top ten in attendance.

In comparison, in their last season in Seattle, 2007-08, the SuperSonics were 28th in attendance, while in their first year in Oklahoma, the Thunder leaped to 11th out of 30 teams. The transition from the top-15 American media market to the 45th benefited both cities. During the team's last years in Seattle the Sonics were operating at a loss (Bonesteel), while Oklahoma embraced its only professional, major league franchise and since its inception the Thunder have never been lower than 15th in attendance, with lower operating costs than the Sonics. More so, they made for a compelling and captivating story, as pointed out by league commissioner David Stern: "There's a unification element… [demonstrating] how a community can rally around a team when, at first glance, it might not seem probable or even possible for a major-league sport to be supported by a smaller market" (Buck 10D).

The career narratives of Detlef Schrempf and Jim McIlvaine are forever connected to the history of the franchise. To a certain extent they are responsible for the move—as it was Schrempf's arrival which led to the Sonics becoming so successful and popular, and it was McIlvaine's arrival that contributed to the deconstruction of that Sonics' roster—but more so they serve as on-court representations of the changes that made the relocation possible. After the 90s "incarnation" of the Sonics failed to win

the NBA Championship, the roster was dismantled and the franchise started gradually losing the support of the fans and the local authorities. The fact that these processes were caused by bench players, shows how important one reserve player can be for the fate of a franchise, as well as how difficult talent evaluation and roster-building in a league as competitive as the NBA really is. And while franchise relocation can be impacted by cultural, economic, and social processes, the intention of this article was to show how on-court performance fits into the discussion.

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