

WE CHANGED THE GAME

This book is dedicated to Roger Brown, Mel Daniels, Slick Leonard and the rest of the ABA Indiana Pacers players and staff who entertained us, inspired us and helped to build a legacy basketball franchise that has truly stood the test of time.

To basketball fans young and old, we hope you enjoy reading this story as much as we enjoyed living it.

WE CHANGED THE GAME



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Photograph on page 61 courtesy of Indiana State Fairgrounds Coliseum

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE Wide-Eyed Witness to History by Robin Miller	7
PROLOGUE Win or Turn Off the Lights	9
FOREWORD William H. Hudnut, III, Indianapolis Mayor from 1976-1992	13



PART 1—Building a Brand New Basketball Team in Indianapolis, 1967–1968

CHAPTER 1 “Naptown” Was True To Its Nickname	20
CHAPTER 2 ABA & Pacers: Two Very Long Shots	23
CHAPTER 3 Professional Basketball in 1967	28
CHAPTER 4 Richard “Dick” Tinkham, Protector of the Pacers	30
CHAPTER 5 Mike Storen: GM with a Plan	32
CHAPTER 6 The Nucleus of a Franchise	35
CHAPTER 7 Adding Some Local Talent	44
CHAPTER 8 The Gong Show in Tennis Shoes	48
CHAPTER 9 Stat Soldiers, Marvel, and the Pacers’ First Voices	51
CHAPTER 10 The Pacers’ First Season, 1967–1968	60
CHAPTER 11 Reggie Harding: Tall, Talented, Tardy, And Troubled	64
CHAPTER 12 Stealing Mel Daniels in 1968	68



PART 2—Changing of the Guard, 1968–1969

CHAPTER 13 Mel Daniels (a.k.a. “Slim”): The Heart of the Pacers	72
CHAPTER 14 Some Whiskey, A Last-Second Rescue and Some Tinkham Magic	75
CHAPTER 15 Bobby Leonard Takes Charge	78
CHAPTER 16 Slick	82
CHAPTER 17 The Original Three-Point Shooter Billy Keller	87
CHAPTER 18 Making a Play for Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar)	90
CHAPTER 19 The Illegal War Waged by the NBA	92
CHAPTER 20 “Which One of You Assholes Is Tinkham?”	95

PART 3—The Pacers Become ABA League Champions, 1970–1973

CHAPTER 21 Adding Championship Depth	98
CHAPTER 22 First Pacers Championship Title in 1970	101
CHAPTER 23 Neto's in the Meadows	108
CHAPTER 24 Jimmy Olsen and the Sexual Revolution	115
CHAPTER 25 David Craig: Some Real Life Training	119
CHAPTER 26 Purdue's Mr. Basketball Rick Mount—A Short, Not-So-Sweet Marriage	122
CHAPTER 27 ABA-NBA Interleague Exhibitions	124
CHAPTER 28 George McGinnis: The Eighth Wonder of the World	127
CHAPTER 29 Dr. Dunk Descends On Indy	132
CHAPTER 30 Second Pacers ABA Title in 1972	134
CHAPTER 31 Finding a New Home for the Pacers by Richard Lugar	136
CHAPTER 32 Market Square Arena Miracle	138
CHAPTER 33 The Third and Final ABA Championship for the Pacers in 1973	142



PART 4—The Historic ABA and NBA Merger

CHAPTER 34 Money Problems and Pacers Rescue #1	146
CHAPTER 35 The 1976 ABA-NBA Merger	153
CHAPTER 36 The Infamous Telethon to Save the Pacers in 1977	159



PART 5—The Pacers are Rescued (Again)

CHAPTER 37 The Simon Brothers Make the Final Save in 1983	165
CHAPTER 38 The NBA Today and the ABA's Lasting Impact	169
CHAPTER 39 Necessity is the Mother of Invention: How the ABA Changed Professional Basketball Outside the Lines	171



EPILOGUE Looking Back at the Last 50 Years and How <i>We Changed the Game</i>	173
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PREFACE

Wide-Eyed Witness to History

Robin Miller, “Jimmy Olsen cub reporter”



TO BE A TEENAGED COLLEGE dropout writing for the largest newspaper in Indiana was almost unheard of back in the '60s. To be nineteen and helping cover the Indiana Pacers was pretty much an unbelievable stroke of luck.

But, thanks to Pacers general manager Mike Storen and my bosses at the *Indianapolis Star*—John Bansch and Cy McBride—all the planets aligned back in 1969 and I was given an opportunity that rarely existed then or now. I wasn't the beat writer; I was the sidebar/feature guy. But Storen sensed my enthusiasm, so he offered to fly me to a lot of the away games and provide me with a room because he wisely knew it was a good investment—I cranked out more positive PR than he could ever buy.

So the stories weren't exactly hard-hitting, but it was my entrée into learning how to write, interview people, cuss, play poker, talk to a female, and come of age. Slick taught me how to read a racing form, what a good poker face looked like, and why “fuck” can be an adjective, noun, or verb.

Because I looked twelve and acted fourteen, Bob Netolicky decided a cub reporter traveling all over the country needed a nickname and so he borrowed the naïve newsman from *Superman* and christened me Jimmy Olsen.

Even though most of the players were only a few years older than me, I was a clueless virgin about the real world, yet those guys accepted me and took me along to lunches, dinners, strip joints, bars and even men's clothing stores trying (against all odds) to make me hip.

And “Jimmy Olsen” was thrust into the middle of one



Mel, Robin, Slick, and Neto

of Indy's most memorable eras and got to help record a city that fell for a team, its players, and its coach.

There will never be anything like the ABA or those early Pacer days because everything today is too corporate, too professional, and too buttoned-down.

From 1969 to 1974 the Pacers were a family, a tight-knit group that didn't have any prejudices or cliques and partied together as hard as they played. They traveled commercial, got \$7 a day in per diem, and got paid more in memories than money.

Bobby Leonard taught them how to win, and the Coliseum rocked louder than when the Beatles played there in 1964.



Robin, George, Neto, and Slick

I was an eyewitness to all three ABA titles, but beyond basketball the Pacers were an eclectic collection of personality and spunk that took advantage of this funny league with the red-white-and-blue ball and helped resurrect pro basketball in this country.

Roger, Mel, Bonham, Barnhill, Edmonds, Aitch, Sidle, and Jay Miller have passed on; Neto, George, Darnell, Hark, and Billy are still in Indianapolis; Tommy Thacker is in Cincy; Art Becker in Phoenix; Ollie Darden in Michigan; Steve Chubin in Colorado; and Freddie is back in DC. Slick is eighty-five and still doing commentary on the radio—just as feisty and funny and famous as he was fifty years ago.

But when George, Neto, Slick, and I get together for lunch each month, it's usually two hours of telling the same stories because they were so good.

Just like those teams and those days.

PROLOGUE

Win or Turn Off the Lights

“I hate to think what would have happened if we hadn’t won that seventh game against Kentucky. I doubt we would have ever become the city and the downtown we are today.” —Richard Tinkham



IT WAS APRIL 17, 1969, and the Indiana State Fairgrounds Coliseum was overflowing with people and enthusiasm.

Down 3-to-1 to the hated Kentucky Colonels in the opening round of the American Basketball Association playoffs, the Indiana Pacers had fought back into a 3-3 deadlock tie with the deciding Game 7 now back in Indianapolis.

All 9,134 seats in the stadium were occupied, and another 1,894 people had paid \$1 each to stand somewhere, anywhere, in the old Coliseum hoping to witness history in the making.

But amidst all the electricity and excitement in the air that night sat a man at courtside who couldn’t enjoy the moment or, worse, bear to think about the consequences. This anxious man was Richard “Dick” Tinkham, legal counsel for the Pacers team, and he knew something that no one else did. He knew this game, this moment in time, was a “must-win” for the city’s professional sports future—literally and figuratively. The Pacers weren’t just playing for the right to advance in the playoffs; they were playing for their own team’s survival.

“We were running out of money,” explains Tinkham, the behind-the-scenes caretaker, midwife, counsel, and dealmaker for the Pacers from the very beginning with the team’s inception just two years prior in 1967. “We’d lost \$300,000 the first year in the league and (president) John DeVoe had died early in 1968, so we had lost our barometer. If we hadn’t won that seventh game and advanced, there was no additional playoff revenue. Advanced pre-season ticket revenue would have been very limited and any new outside investors would have been almost impossible to find. There was probably no tomorrow for this franchise because there was no more money and, even worse, no plan.”

INDIANA PROFESSIONAL SPORTS, INC.	
Statement of Income and Expense	
Filed Year ending June 30, 1968	
(Prepared from the books of account subject under verification)	
INCOME:	
Admission receipts - league games	\$332,988.69
Admission receipts - exhibition games	2,816.76
Program sales	6,808.85
Program advertising	5,630.82
Television	2,500.00
Interest	1,630.00
Sale of securities	3,800.00
Sale of merchandise	7,288.00
All-Star game activities (loss)	(27,536.53)
Miscellaneous	425.88
	\$ 335,132.40
EXPENSES - schedule A-1 - see note 1	
Player	287,000.93
Operations	212,729.44
Administrative	162,483.46
667,213.83	
Other expense - Interest	\$ 689.07
Other expense - Organization expense	2,535.32
	3,213.39
	670,432.22
EXCESS OF (DEFICIT) OVER INCOME	(335,299.82)
RETAINED EARNINGS:	
Balance, July 1, 1967 - deficit	(1,691.00)
Balance, June 30, 1968 - deficit - exhibit B	\$ (336,351.22)

This balance sheet shows the team's \$300,000+ loss in 1967

The original investment of \$6,000 to get an ABA franchise had blossomed to \$215,000 by May 1967 as the inaugural season loomed, but all that money was gone. Lots of money was being spent on operations and administrative expenses as well as player salaries, but the money that the team brought in wasn't enough to cover all of that.

"John DeVoe did a great job of raising money and, besides selling life insurance, all he did was work on the Pacers. But after his death, there was nobody doing that anymore and there was no sense of urgency from the board of directors," Tinkham reflects. "They all had full-time jobs and other responsibilities and didn't have the time to invest like John did. It was more of a crapshoot, where they could throw some money at it, enjoy the games and hope things worked out. No disrespect, but it wasn't life and death to those guys and their lives weren't going to change with or without the Pacers. But I knew what the consequences were going to be if we didn't win that game."

Win-or-go-home is playoff ball reality, but this was something altogether different. This was win-or-lock-the-doors-forever, and beating any team three straight times was rare—especially with Kentucky's daunting backcourt of Louie Dampier and Darrell Carrier plus the inside muscle of Jim Ligon, Bobby Rascoe, and Gene Moore.

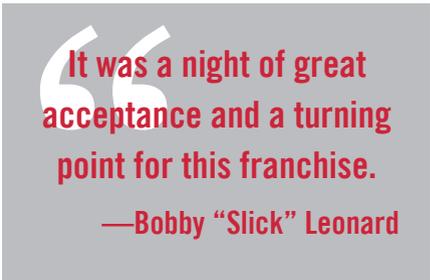
It was a two-point game at halftime before the Pacers expanded their lead to 10, ending this monumental game in a 120-111 victory.

The starting five never rested as Bob Netolicky was unstoppable with 32 points and 16 boards, supported by Roger Brown's 29 points and Tom Thacker's 19 with Freddie Lewis (18) and Mel Daniels (16) delivering like always.

“It was a night of great acceptance and a turning point for this franchise,” says coach Bobby “Slick” Leonard, who was carried off the floor by jubilant fans. “It was the first time we’d sold out since the ABA opener in ‘67 and it was a milestone for the city. It had a major league atmosphere and we beat our arch rivals. But I wasn’t aware we would have folded if we’d lost. Nobody said anything to me.”

Tinkham reveals now that Pacers general manager Mike Storen didn’t know either. “I couldn’t tell anybody because I didn’t know what was going to happen other than we were done. Storen wasn’t on the board, he just paid the bills, and the board was playing things day-to-day hoping it would work. I knew it was tenuous because nobody wanted to put in any more money.”

Tinkham was able to breathe a little easier as the game went on to a win for the Pacers, but he also knew that the livelihood of the Pacers players and fans still hung in the balance of a board of directors who were reluctant to invest more money in a team with an uncertain future. “I knew we had to keep winning to stay afloat, so the celebration was somewhat muted for me,” he admits today.



It was a night of great acceptance and a turning point for this franchise.
—Bobby “Slick” Leonard

As it turned out, the Pacers crushed Miami to win the Eastern Division, advancing to the ABA league championship where they lost a pair of overtime games and a 4-1 decision to the Oakland Oaks. But while they didn’t clinch the title, they never gave up during the season. Fighting game after game for more wins—wins for the fans who believed in their new team and hoped desperately for them to bring home the first title for Indianapolis, and wins for their board of directors who were watching with a cautious optimism—the Pacers made it to the 1968-69 season finals against all odds. Had they lost any big matches, had they fallen short in any way, today the Pacers might just be a talented basketball team that once upon a time played in Indianapolis. But by continuing to win that year—that crucial seventh game win—Indiana had kept the lights on, the payroll paid and the doors open on E. 38th Street.



Neto celebrates the Game 7 win over Kentucky
Photo courtesy the Indianapolis Star

“I hate to think what would have happened if we hadn’t won that seventh game against Kentucky,” says Tinkham. “I doubt we would have ever become the city and the downtown we are today.”

But to understand what led to that must-win season-long battle of survival in 1969, and to fully grasp the incredibly fragile state of existence of the original Pacers team between 1969 and 1983, we must first go back in time to where the story really began, in 1967 Indianapolis. It was that historic moment in time when the Pacers basketball franchise first came to be, and it will send chills up your spine to know just how close this beloved

team almost came to an end so many times in their early days. It was the pure heart, insane dedication, and steadfast loyalty of a few die-hard believers and very special basketball fans that truly kept the Pacers going against all odds.

PART I



Building a Brand New Basketball Team in Indianapolis

1967–1968



“NAPTOWN” WAS TRUE TO ITS NICKNAME

1



THE YEAR 1967 WAS A pivotal time in US history. The sixties opened with the Space Race and deadly nuclear tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States. The atmosphere was tense already when national challenges and social unrest were heightened by strained relations and race riots between the black and white communities. The country had watched as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders led the famous march for equal rights in Washington, DC, where Dr. King gave his legendary “I Have a Dream” speech, just a couple of months before US President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in broad daylight in 1963.

Americans saw the rise of Olympic heavyweight boxing champion and sports phenomenon Cassius Clay (later known as Muhammad Ali) and felt the heart-breaking loss of Dr. King. By 1967, the Vietnam War was running at full speed with large joint-force attacks on the Iron Triangle being carried out while many individuals back home were seeing horrid images of the war and its casualties

and begging for U.S. troops to be sent home. That same year, professional football’s very first Super Bowl was played, officially called the AFL-NFL World Championship Game, and the US federal hourly mini-



East Washington Street, “Naptown” in the 1960s / Indiana State Library

mum wage was set at \$1.40.

And there in 1967 Indiana, the Hoosier State, its downtown Indianapolis was a bustling metropolis full of people and energy from eight in the morning to five in the evening, Monday through Friday. Women shopped at L.S. Ayres, William H. Block, L. Strauss, and the H.P. Wasson Company, while men worked at Eli Lilly, Indiana Bell, Em-Roe Sporting Goods, Abel's Auto, and either AFNB, Merchants, or Indiana National banks.

On the other hand, when the sun went away, so did the populace. Other than the famous St. Elmo's Steakhouse and the King Cole restaurant, there wasn't any place of business with the lights on past seven o'clock, unless you counted the bus station. Nightlife in Indianapolis mostly consisted of a burlesque house, Shannon's Roaring 20s strip joint, and The Rat Fink Lounge with the Famous Flame nightclub some twenty blocks from Monument Circle.

The classy Claypool Hotel and its 450 rooms had been permanently damaged by a fire and was closed—never to open again—while the Lincoln Hotel across the street wasn't long for this world either, because business was horrible except for once a year during May.

There were no condominiums or housing projects downtown, just a lot of old buildings waiting to be torn down, and a few shanties waiting on the wrecking ball. Indy was dismal at night.

Living downtown wasn't an option in the mid-'60s as the suburbs were burgeoning, and about the only time anybody ventured into the city was at Christmas to see the lights on Monument Circle and the Christmas display at Ayres. Or, on the Saturday before the Indianapolis 500 race to watch the parade.

And that was what created Indy's mantra: The city that came alive once a year for an auto race and then went back to a deep sleep. Naptown really was the perfect nickname because Indianapolis was the state capital by day and a ghost town by night.

There wasn't much life, let alone nightlife, in Indiana's largest city besides the daily workforce.

The Triple-A Indianapolis Indians was the one and only sports staple, the

players plying their trade out on W. 16th Street at Victory Field, where entertainers like James Brown might perform on a summer night. And while the Tribe played good baseball and future stars like Rocky Colavito, Roger Maris, and Harmon Killebrew had stopped here on their way to the big league, it was still just minor league baseball and a team whose transient success didn't produce any overwhelming sense of community pride.

Minor league football came and went with the Indianapolis Warriors at Victory Field in the United Football League from 1961 to 1964, while the Fairgrounds Coliseum hosted hockey in the form of the Indianapolis Chiefs of the International League from 1955 to 1962.

The only time Indy had received a taste of professional sports at a high level it started strong and then bottomed out in controversy. From 1949 to 1953 the Indianapolis Olympians played in the National Basketball Association and packed Butler Fieldhouse with former Kentucky stars Alex Groza and Ralph Beard as the big star names. But it all came crashing down when Groza and Beard were implicated in a betting scandal from their college days and banned from the NBA for life. So pro basketball's short but exciting run in Indianapolis was over and quickly forgotten.

The biggest cheers of the year usually had been for Indiana's one-class high school basketball tournament and Hoosier Hysteria again occupied center stage while Indiana, Purdue, and Butler Universities provided their share of hardwood heroics during the winter months. In many ways, it seemed like Indianapolis was better suited for high school and college games, and it didn't look like the pro game would ever surface again.

Until a half-dozen dreamers sat down over a few beers in West Lafayette during the summer of 1966. Little did they know that they would help transform a city, a professional sports league, and the game of basketball forever.