

Fun While it Lasted

Kevin Loder was a first round draft pick of the National Basketball Association's Kansas City Kings in the spring of 1981 out of Alabama State University. The 6' 6" forward played 147 games for the Kings over two plus seasons, but by the winter of 1983 he found himself on the Gulf Coast of Florida, suiting up for the Sarasota Stingers of the Continental Basketball Association.

The CBA was the Official Developmental League of the NBA at the time and functioned in some ways as basketball's equivalent to triple-A minor league baseball. As Loder points out below, the CBA was the best opportunity for players cut from NBA rosters to keep themselves in view of NBA personnel directors. An NBA call-up could come at any moment, typically in the form of a 10-day contract to fill in for an injured player.

But the CBA was also a chaotic organization that barely held itself together from one season to the next. Author and Fox Sports analyst Charley Rosen, who coached in the league throughout the 1980's, famously referred to the circuit as the "Cockroach Basketball League". During Loder's three seasons in the CBA from 1983 to 1986, the owner of his Sarasota was sent to federal prison for fraud and he and his Evansville (IN) Thunder teammates were forced to sue their own league to take part in the 1986 playoffs.

Today Kevin Loder is a father of six and grandfather of eighteen. He works as a project manager for a green technology firm in Texas and also owns a business consulting firm. Loder also serves as Vice President of Houston chapter of the NBA Retired Players' Association.

Kevin Loder spoke to Fun While It Lasted about life in the Continental Basketball Association on December 6th, 2011.

Interview begins after the jump.

FWiL:

You were a first round draft pick of the Kansas City in 1981 and played two years and change for the Kings in the NBA. When you found out you were going to play for the Sarasota Stingers in the CBA in 1983, how familiar were you with the CBA at that point?

LODER:

I was familiar with the league simply based on the knowledge that it was similar to minor league baseball. Kind of a triple-A setting where guys had an opportunity to showcase their skills and have the opportunity get back into the NBA. Or to elevate themselves for the first time. Most of the guys had been drafted and were close to or still a part of the franchise that drafted them. So they could showcase their skills to break into or get back to the NBA.

So the idea was that I needed to stay close. NBA teams had injuries and at times they needed to pull someone up. You also had the opportunity to go overseas and play internationally, but those particular contractual agreements and the distance involved did not allow you to be plug-and-play, if you will. In the CBA, you could immediately be pulled up. Your agent was out there talking to teams that had needs at your particular position.

During the time I was playing in the CBA I was under consideration several times to get back into the NBA. As a matter of fact, Magic Johnson and I are both from Michigan. He told me a story that he had vouched for me to be chosen for a call-up to the Lakers during their run to the NBA title in 1985. It was between Don Collins, Chuck Nevitt and myself. And they ended up choosing Chuck Nevitt, who was a big 7' 6" guy to back up Kareem. And Chuck Nevitt played something like three minutes in 10 or 12 games at the end of the season and all through the playoffs. He got a ring and made about \$275,000 or \$300,000. Just that close, the choice could have been me.

<Laughing> So, I tried to work through the resentment about Chuck and I at this particular point. He didn't know that. But it shows just how close you could be by being in the CBA. You could be chosen at any moment.

FWiL:

What are your memories of playing for Sarasota Stingers coach Bill Musselman? He had a reputation as a tough coach.

LODER:

You're right. Bill Musselman was a no-nonsense guy. He was a hard-nosed guy. He was very intense and he played to win. He put his best players out there on the floor and he expected them to play hard for him. And that was fine for me. Because that lined up exactly with my college coach. Bill Musselman and I got along great and I really miss him. He was a guy that was definitely a gift to the game and he was a winner.

FWiL:

The CBA had a reputation as an offense-only league with really high scores. Was there a perception among the players that playing defense wasn't going to help you get noticed but that you had to rack up the biggest point totals you possible could? Or is that inaccurate?

LODER:

In that particular league, you had guys where scoring may not have been their forte. There were a lot of people trying to score that really weren't scorers. That created a lot more rebounds, a lot more blocked shots, a lot more offensive minded kinds of things. It was an opportunity for guys who didn't score that much to work on their games and for guys that did score to perfect that. If you're a scorer, you don't get better playing defense.

Fans like to see high scoring affairs. They like to see the scoring part. That's the part that they enjoy. Guys still got after it on defense. <Laughing> It's just that it didn't get seriously intense until the last five or seven minutes of the game when defensive skills came into play.

FWiL:

What other clubs did you play for in the CBA besides Sarasota?

LODER:

I played for the Evansville Thunder and those were the two teams that I played for. Roger Brown was the coach at Evansville when I was there. However, that team did not last very long. We had a very good team - we had about five first round picks on that team. Guys like Dewayne Scales, Carlos Clark and Clyde Bradshaw.

It was kind of a peril though. The team ended up being disbanded during the season, went bankrupt. We won 22 out of 26 games with no coach and seven players. We finished second in our division and the league tried to put us out of the league and not allow us to qualify for the playoffs based on the fact that we

didn't have finances. We took them to court. We had an injunction filed in Evansville, Indiana to hold up the entire CBA playoffs until they reinstated us and put us back into rightful standing and paid for us to participate based on the fact that they were not allowing us to work in the industry that we had qualified to work in. I testified on the stand and it was quite the undertaking. And had we gone on to win the CBA that year, it would have been a great story that probably would have been turned into a movie.

FWiL:

When you say you had no coach, does that mean that Roger Brown left at the point that the team went bankrupt?

Loder:

They couldn't pay him. And so he left because the team went bankrupt. Then we had no coach and so we coached ourselves.

FWiL:

And were you guys being paid or did you just play on for pride?

Loder:

Yeah, we were being paid, but they only paid for seven players, not the normal 10-12 man roster. So that's the way that went.

FWiL:

There are many stories about the living conditions of playing in the CBA in those days. Are there a few memories that stand out to you about unusual or absurd conditions that you guys had to put up with, in terms of travel or facilities or just getting paid from week to week?

Loder:

Well...once you've experienced the NBA, the CBA is always going to be a demotion. It is a sobering experience also that allows you to really appreciate the NBA more so. A lot of guys do not appreciate the NBA experience for what it is and once it's taken away from you, you have a whole different perspective.

Sure there's a lot of stories...traveling long hours on buses and different things of that particular nature. But you are still playing the game that you've loved all your life for money, even though you are being paid at a lesser rate. So however deplorable it is, you can always choose to do something different. But when you're doing something that you love, it's all good. It's all good.

FWiL:

The first year that you played in Sarasota, the team was new and it was owned by a stockbroker named Jeffrey Fischer. It subsequently came out that he had essentially bought the team and paid for it with money that he had stolen from his brokerage clients. Did that kind of turmoil effect you as players at all, or was that out of sight and out of mind and you were able to just focus on competing?

Loder:

Well, at that particular time they were trying to create a large critical mass <of teams> in the CBA. Let's just say there was not a lot of scrutiny about the background checks, if you will, of where and how someone makes their money.

At any rate, players were removed from that. We just assumed that whoever was a part of <ownership> was capable of delivering. That kind of thing happened overseas as well and so those were common place stories when you were playing in these leagues that were not the NBA. Stability was in the NBA.

FWiL:

You played in both leagues - who were a couple guys that were overlooked that you felt could have been at least solid NBA players if they had been given the opportunity?

Loder:

Most of the other guys that I remember really came from the NBA and were trying to get back, much like myself. Don Collins was one of those guys. Carlos Clark was another.

One guy I played with was a guy by the name of Joe Binion out of North Carolina A&T. He was a great scorer, six foot eight, and was a really great guy but Joe never really got that opportunity to play on the next level.