

LOOSE BALLS

**THE SHORT, WILD LIFE
OF THE AMERICAN
BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION**

TERRY PLUTO

"ABA veterans say 'you had to be there,' and now, thanks to this book, we are."

—Steve Gietschier, *The Sporting News*

"Pluto is the Boswell of basketball." —Michael Anderson, *The New York Times*

"*Loose Balls* is either the great American novel in oral-history sound bites or the definitive book on the 1970s, or both: sex, drugs, platform shoes, sideburns, slam dunks, midnight franchise shifts, million-dollar deferred-payment player contracts, the three-point shot, Dr. J., Marvin (Bad News) Barnes, LaVeme (Jelly) Tart and Pat Boone (yes, Pat Boone). Pro sports, the way they oughta be."

—*Newsweek*

What do Julius Erving, Larry Brown, Moses Malone, Bob Costas, the Indiana Pacers, the San Antonio Spurs and the Slam Dunk Contest have in common? They all got their professional starts in the American Basketball Association.

The NBA may have won the financial battle, but the ABA won the artistic war. With its stress on wide-open individual play, the adoption of the 3-point shot and pressing defense, and the encouragement of flashy moves and flying dunks, today's NBA is still—decades later—just the ABA without the red, white and blue ball.

Loose Balls is, after all these years, the definitive and most widely respected history of the ABA. It's a wild ride through some of the wackiest, funniest, strangest times ever to hit pro sports—told entirely through the (often incredible) words of those who played, wrote and connived their way through the league's nine seasons.

"I assure you I could not recommend this book more highly. This is one of the funniest sports books of all-time."

—Bob Ryan, *The Boston Globe*



TERRY PLUTO is a columnist for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. He's the author of 22 books, has twice been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and has been named "Ohio Sportswriter of the Year" eight times. He has been called "perhaps the best American writer of sports books" by the *Chicago Tribune*. He lives in Akron, Ohio.



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LOOSE BALLS

The Short, Wild Life of the
American Basketball Association
—As Told by the Players,
Coaches, and Movers
and Shakers Who Made It Happen

TERRY PLUTO

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To Karen and Tony Stastny

*and to Gene Littles, Steve Jones, Dave Twardzik, Mel Daniels,
Terry Stemberge, Mack Calvin, Mike Storen, Dick Tinkham,
Harry Weltman, Carl Scheer, Billy Keller, Ron Grinker
and all the rest who lived the ABA.*

Acknowledgments

The reason for this book is that so many people felt it had to be written. There were those who wanted to write the book themselves but never got around to it, yet the stories of the ABA lived on inside them, waiting—maybe even demanding—to be told. So this book is really their book in their voices. The hardest part of this project was choosing what should stay in, not finding enough stories to fill it. The original manuscript was nearly a thousand pages; I trust that the stories that didn't make it will eventually be heard. The book was originally the idea of Simon & Schuster editor Jeff Neuman, who went far beyond the call of duty in shaping the material. Roberta Pluto and Pat McCubbin transcribed more than 150 hours of tapes. Others behind the scenes who made significant contributions to the work were Faith Hamlin, Dale Ratermann, Wayne Witt, Mark Patrick, Warner Fusselle, Jon Singer, and Alan Spatrack. I thank them all.

—Terry Pluto

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LOOSE BALLS

Introduction

The old American Basketball Association . . .

Most fans remember it for the quirky red, white and blue basketball. Or perhaps as the league that made famous the 3-point shot. Maybe some fans know that the ABA gave birth to the Slam Dunk Contest. Astute basketball fans think of it as the league that gave us Julius Erving, Larry Brown, Doug Moe and Connie Hawkins, as well as Moses Malone and a couple of other high school kids who went straight to the pros. Some even remember that it was the birthplace of the San Antonio Spurs, the Denver Nuggets, the New Jersey Nets and the Indiana Pacers.

Ever hear of a guy named Bob Costas? His first radio gig was in the ABA as the voice of the Spirit of St. Louis, where he tried to explain to the world—or at least the good part of it reached by KMOX's booming 50,000-watt signal—that star Marvin Barnes had missed yet another team flight, this one from Louisville to St. Louis that was scheduled to depart at 8 A.M. eastern time and arrive at 7:55 central.

Why did Barnes miss the flight?

Because, as Barnes explained, he “didn’t want to get in no time machine.”

Then again, Barnes seldom made any flight before noon, regardless of the time zone. After missing one flight, he hired a private jet to take him to a road game, then forgot to pay the pilot. At the end of the first quarter, the pilot showed up at the arena wanting his money. During the next timeout, Barnes in uniform, went into the dressing room, came out with his checkbook and paid the man.

True story . . . we think.

Barnes also had 13 telephones in his house, but that’s another story. Is it true? Maybe. When asked about it, Barnes counted up to seven phones in his house, then started laughing so hard he quit counting.

Hardcore basketball fans think about Marvin Barnes as much as they think about Julius Erving when it comes to the ABA. It’s like Barnes was the bad angel on one shoulder, Erving the good angel on the other.

Erving was the league statesman, the spokesman, the player who could outdo anyone on any playground with his soaring dunks and double pumps under the basket. And in the boardroom, Erving could sound like one of the league’s owners, selling the ABA as a real alternative to the NBA—and how if the NBA were smart, they’d merge the two leagues right now. Dr. J’s on-court aerobatics made the case as persuasively as any economic argument could.

If Marvin Barnes had been smart, he’d have listened a little more to players like Erving. Of course it would have helped if Barnes had just shown up with his teammates. Too often, he wandered in about 30 minutes before tip-off, sometimes with a bag of burgers and fries from McDonald’s, then sat on the trainer’s table getting his ankles taped as he chowed down a Big Mac. Then went out and scored 40.

True story . . . or at least that’s how some remember it.

But that’s what the ABA was about: stories, myths and legends—including the stories about the guy named John Brisker, who brought a gun to the dressing room; who once stomped a player’s head on the court; who later was killed in Uganda while doing some diamond business with Idi Amin.

True stories? Who knows?

But they’re all a part of the ABA, the most storied league of them all.

Keep this in mind: The ABA never should have been started, much less have lasted from 1967-76 while changing the entire structure of pro basketball in the process. The Indiana Pacers, New Jersey

Nets, San Antonio Spurs and Denver Nuggets never should have played a single game, much less moved from the ABA to the NBA. The 3-point shot should be nothing more than a piece of long forgotten basketball history, much like the center jump made after each basket.

That's because when Dennis Murphy came up with the idea of the ABA in the 1960s—he's not sure exactly when—it was supposed to have been a second pro football league, only the American Football League had already beaten Murphy and his friends to the idea.

Murphy was the mayor of Buena Park, California. He had assembled some money people for his proposed football league. When that concept fell through, he did some serious marketing research and came up with the idea of the ABA. That research consisted of one thing: counting the number of NBA teams. "There was only one hockey and one basketball league," Murphy said. "So why not have another? Since I knew nothing about hockey, but basketball was my favorite sport, I figured I'd pursue the idea of a basketball league. I saw that the NBA had 12 [teams]. It seemed like there should be more teams. Why? I don't know. What the hell, it was worth a shot."

It's hard today to imagine the pro sports landscape of the middle 1960s. There was no cable TV, no internet. There was no tremendous love for pro basketball, even the NBA variety, in most cities. The Boston Celtics were winning world titles every year, but they seldom sold out and usually were outdrawn by the National Hockey League's Boston Bruins. Yes, the NBA had only a dozen teams, but close to half of them consistently lost money. There were only three channels available on most black and white TVs, and the networks often recorded higher ratings for bowling and boxing than for NBA playoff games. Had Murphy actually studied the situation with some people who could realistically assess the utter lack of interest in pro basketball, the experts would have told him that pro sports were like this: Baseball was still king, but football was ascending to the throne: pro football was the emerging as the sport of the 1960s. Pro basketball was a distant third in most cities. In some places it was fourth, behind either boxing or college basketball.

There already had been a second pro basketball league in the early 1960s, the American Basketball League. It folded despite the presence of an owner named George Steinbrenner and a coach named Bill Sharman, who was a Hall of Fame player for the Boston Celtics and would win NBA and ABA championships later in his career. Remember, more people wanted to watch bowling than the NBA. Another pro basketball league? Been there, done that and here's the red ink on the bank statements to prove it.

Murphy and his buddies didn't worry about that. In fact, they didn't even think about it. They wanted a piece of the pro sports action—almost any piece of any sport. They had seen the upstart AFL force a lucrative merger with the established National Football League, and they figured they could get in on some of that action in another arena. They were dreamers, schemers and sometimes liars. Often, the biggest whoppers they told were to themselves, just to keep the league alive. They were driven more out of desperation than inspiration.

Dick Tinkham was one of the early owners in the league, putting together the Indiana Pacers. Tinkham said, "We had no plan. None. We wanted to start a second basketball league and force the NBA to merge with us. That was a goal. But a plan? We had none. We went by the seat of our pants and made it up as we went along. If a rule didn't fit with something we wanted to do, we just changed it or ignored it. If someone had an idea, no matter how lame-brained, usually someone tried it."

Which brings us to the red, white and blue basketball.

It was the brainchild of George Mikan, the man voted the NBA's best player for the first 50 years of the 20th century. He was 6-foot-10 in an era when that made him look 7-foot-10. He was Chamberlain and Shaq before there were Chamberlain and Shaq. When Dennis Murphy and the boys

were hunting for a commissioner of the new league, they found Mikan in Minneapolis, where he owned a travel agency and practiced a little law.

Once again, this was the result of in-depth research: “I think Dennis Murphy read an article about me in *Sport* magazine which said I’d make a good commissioner of the NBA because I had a law degree.”

The new owners of the new league that had yet to play a game, sign a player or even buy a basketball approached the NBA’s first real star and offered him the keys to the ABA. Of course, there were no buildings, either.

But the guys did seem to have some money, and Mikan convinced them to pay him \$50,000 annually for three years.

That was a lot of money in 1967, more money than Mikan had ever made as a player.

The new owners wanted the ABA office to be in New York.

Mikan said it had to be in Minneapolis, because his travel agency was in Minneapolis and he wasn’t moving.

So they headquartered the ABA in Minneapolis, which was not exactly the media capital of America. Of course, Mikan could have said Siberia, and the owners would have invested in sled dogs and snowshoes to make him happy. Having Mikan gave them legitimacy. He was a real basketball name, one of the all-time greats, a Hall of Famer. He was everything the founders of the ABA were not—he was Mr. Pro Basketball.

What does this have to do with the red, white and blue ball?

“The ABA had a red, white and blue ball because I said it would have one,” said Mikan.

Most of the owners stared up at the monstrous Mikan as he if had just lost his mind, but no one was about to look him in the eye and tell him that. How could they, unless they stood on a ladder?

Besides, they wanted Mikan. And Mikan—who wore glasses—said he had trouble seeing the brown ball when he watched basketball games. If Mikan had had better eyesight, would the ABA also have had a brown ball? Who knows? Mikan just said the league was the *American* Basketball Association and *America’s* colors are red, white and blue. You can see a red, white and blue ball.

“The owners acted like I wanted to burn the flag when I said to forget the brown ball,” said Mikan.

Once again, no marketing surveys, no firms hired to determine the viability of a red, white and blue ball. George Mikan wanted a red, white and blue ball, so the ABA had a red, white and blue ball.

Something else Mikan added: We will have a 3-point shot.

OK, said the owners. Why not? If we have a 3-colored ball, why not a 3-point shot?

True stories, for real.

That’s why it’s so easy to fall in love with the ABA—especially when looking at it in the nostalgic tint of life’s rear-view mirror. You hear these stories and realize there will never be anything quite like this again.

• • •

That’s also why people have been reading *Loose Balls* since it was first published in 1990. It’s the story of some of basketball’s biggest names: Julius Erving, Rick Barry, Billy Cunningham and Spencer Haywood. Even Wilt Chamberlain passed through the ABA. But it’s the guys like Dennis Murphy who make the story irresistible. They were making it up as they went along. It’s as if a bunch of neighborhood kids got together, decided to put on a little show with some music in their garage and came up with *Oklahoma!* or *Cats*.

It just never should have happened . . . but it did.

This book is much like the league. The Dennis Murphy of the project was a former Simon

Schuster editor named Jeff Neuman. He had grown up an ABA fan, watching Julius Erving and the New York Nets. He proposed the idea of an ABA book to me. I had grown up in Cleveland and had never seen an ABA game, although my mother used to buy me a red, white and blue basketball every Christmas. Just like George Mikan, she liked the colors better than the standard drab brown of the NBA.

I knew nothing about the ABA. As I began to research the league, I discovered there was little actually written about it. Nor did much film remain. All that lived on were the people involved and their memories. Or, as Bob Costas told me, “Virtually everything that is known about it comes by word of mouth, as if it happened centuries ago.”

Neuman told me to write it that way: Just write what they said.

This reminds me of what frustrated reporters sometimes admit in private: “We don’t write the truth. We just write what people say is the truth.”

Forget about not being able to handle the truth, as Jack Nicholson screams in *A Few Good Men*. When it comes to the ABA, it’s really impossible to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

What you have are incredible stories that seem even more amazing with the passing of time.

I started much like Murphy did with the real ABA. I talked to one person from the league. Then another. And another. They’d tell me that I needed to contact this guy, who knew the real scoop. They gave me names and phone numbers of people whom I’d never heard of, despite being a veteran professional basketball writer at the time. Virtually everyone—big name or obscure front-office worker—wanted to tell their story about the ABA. They loved the league. They wanted to make the book work. They trusted me with their time, stories and in some cases pieces of their heart and a good chunk of their youth.

It’s what people said that forms the truth about the ABA, or as much truth as we know or need. Sometimes, memories were fuzzy. Other times, accounts didn’t match up. In some cases, they seemed so outrageous, I couldn’t believe they were true—but I put them in the book anyway, especially when several sources told me the same story. The book is pure oral history, as if you were sitting at a table with Larry Brown, Doug Moe, Bob Costas and so many others—listening to them tell the story of the ABA.

That idea also was Neuman’s, and the concept was completely foreign and incredibly scary to me despite the fact that I had already written eight books. It was our version of the red, white and blue ball. We knew some people would be put off by the format, but others would be fascinated by it. The idea was to make it easy to read, free flowing, sometimes wild, usually unusual.

Part of what made the book popular is the hip style that reflected how the game was played in the old ABA.

As veteran agent Ron Grinker said, “The NBA was a symphony, the ABA was jazz.”

And the tunes matched the times.

Which brings us to the Slam Dunk Contest.

This was vintage ABA. The year was 1976. The war between the ABA and the NBA had lasted nine long years. The ABA was down to seven teams and one division. How can you have an All-Star game with seven teams? That was the question facing ABA executives (or what was left of them). Three teams had folded since the start of training camp. The game would be in Denver, because Denver had a strong fan base, a great coach in Larry Brown and a superstar in David Thompson. Why not have the Nuggets play a group of All-Stars from the other six teams?

Why not, indeed?

Done.

(In fact, this was what the National Hockey League had done during its many years as a six-team league—play an All-Star game between the Stanley Cup Champions and the top players from the other five teams. Of course, the Denver Nuggets weren't the reigning ABA champions—the Kentucky Colonels were—but nobody was going to let that stand in the way of a good promotion.)

They wanted something special for halftime. They had already imported Glen Campbell and Charlie Rich to do a concert around the game. Hey, this was 1976. Denver was the West. Campbell and Rich were still hot in country music. But they wanted something else, something funky, something that could catch the attention of the country.

A guy named Jim Bukata, a former ABA public relations man, said, "Let's have a Slam Dunk Contest."

Everyone at the table said, "Hey, that sounds great, a Slam Dunk Contest."

Then silence struck.

How do you have a Slam Dunk Contest? As far as any of them knew, there had never been a dunking contest. So like everything else in the ABA, they began to just make it up. And it ended with Julius Erving winning it when he drove the length of the court, took off from the foul line, flew 15 feet in the air—and dunked!

True story . . . almost.

His foot went a little bit over the foul line—we actually do have film of this—but it was close enough! Give him 14 feet, 10 inches and a dunk for the ages.

Here were the competitors in the contest: David Thompson, George Gervin, Larry Kenon, Art Gilmore and Erving. Now there's a starting five that would have won a few games in any league.

And when the NBA finally brought four teams into the NBA for the 1976-77 season (Indiana, San Antonio, Denver and the New York—soon to be New Jersey—Nets), the world discovered something the ABA fans had known for the last nine years following the red, white and blue bouncing ball: These guys could really play!

In that first year after the merger, four of the NBA's top 10 scorers had played in the ABA. Five of the 10 starters in the NBA finals between Portland and Philadelphia had played in the ABA. Denver won the Midwest Division. Ten former ABA players made the All-Star teams.

But more important, the ABA brought its loose, improvisational style to the NBA, a new approach to everything from playing to coaching to marketing. The dance teams that you see in virtually every NBA arena? The ABA had them first, or something like them. There were these girls in Miami who sat under the baskets, gave officials water during timeouts and jiggled for the fans. They wore bikinis. Or as one Miami Floridian's operative said, "We are talking about a very brief bikini situation." They were much more honest than many of today's "dance teams." They skipped the dancing part and just strutted their stuff. Let's be truthful, the NBA has incorporated every major ABA innovation except for the red, white and blue ball. And with the league's quest to sell merchandise, who knows? Maybe one day that tricolored ball will show up at an NBA arena near you. It's already featured in the 3-point shooting contest at the All-Star weekend. The last ball of each rack, which counts double and is called "the money ball," is red, white and blue.

True story.

—Terry Pluto
October 2000

Cast of Characters

- STEVE ALBERT:** Broadcast the New York Nets in their final championship season and now does the same for the New Jersey Nets.
- STEVE ARNOLD:** The agent for Julius Erving and others, now in private business in California.
- RICK BARRY:** First NBA player to jump to the ABA. A member of the Hall of Fame and a broadcaster of NBA games for the TNT network.
- BOB BASS:** A coach of several ABA teams, now general manager of the San Antonio Spurs.
- ZELMO BEATY:** All-Star center for Utah, now a stockbroker in Seattle.
- AL BIANCHI:** Former coach of the Virginia Squires, now the general manager of the New York Knicks.
- LEONARD BLOOM:** Former owner of the San Diego franchise, now in private business in California.
- ROY BOE:** Former owner of the New York Nets, now a restaurant owner in Long Island, New York.
- PAT BOONE:** Former owner of the Oakland Oaks, still singing and playing pickup basketball in Los Angeles.
- HUBIE BROWN:** Former coach of Kentucky, now analyst for CBS.
- LARRY BROWN:** Former coach of Denver and Carolina, now coach of the San Antonio Spurs.
- ROGER BROWN:** All-Star forward with Indiana, now lives in Indianapolis and operates several small businesses.
- JIM BUKATA:** Former ABA public relations man, now works for International Management Group.
- MACK CALVIN:** All-Star guard with several ABA teams, now an assistant coach with the Milwaukee Bucks.
- DON CHANEY:** Spent one year with St. Louis, now coach of the Houston Rockets.
- JIM CHONES:** Former center with New York and Carolina, now a broadcaster for the Cleveland Cavaliers.
- BOB COSTAS:** Former broadcaster with St. Louis, now works for NBC.
- DAVE CRAIG:** Still trainer of the Indiana Pacers.
- LARRY CREGER:** Former assistant to Bill Sharman in L.A. and Utah, now operates the L.A. summer pro league.
- BILLY CUNNINGHAM:** Former member of the Carolina Cougars, now executive vice president of the Miami Heat.

MEL DANIELS: Former All-Star center with Indiana, now works for the Pacers as a scout.

JEFF DENBERG: Former New York sportswriter, now covers the Atlanta Hawks.

LARRY DONALD: Editor of *Basketball Times*.

ANGELO DROSSOS: Former owner of the San Antonio Spurs, now an investment broker in San Antonio.

NORM DRUCKER: Former ABA official, now works with the World Basketball League as chief of referees and officials.

WAYNE EMBRY: Former general manager of the Milwaukee Bucks, now general manager with the Cleveland Cavaliers.

JULIUS ERVING: Greatest player in ABA history, now has a variety of business interests in Philadelphia.

COTTON FITZSIMMONS: Veteran NBA coach, now with Phoenix.

EARL FOREMAN: Former owner of the Virginia Squires, now commissioner of the Major Indoor Soccer League.

WARNER FUSSELLE: Former broadcaster in Virginia, now works for Major League Baseball, Inc.

MIKE GOLDBERG: Former ABA legal counsel, now represents several NBA coaches.

RON GRINKER: Still an attorney and players' agent.

JOE GUSHUE: Former ABA official, now in private business.

ALEX HANNUM: Former coach of Oakland and Denver, now lives in California and is in the construction business.

JERRY HARKNESS: Former Indiana Pacer, now lives in Indianapolis and is in private business.

DEL HARRIS: Former assistant in Utah, now head coach of the Milwaukee Bucks.

GEORGE IRVINE: Veteran ABA player, now player personnel director of the Indiana Pacers.

DAN ISSEL: Former ABA star center and forward, now broadcasts the Denver Nuggets games.

STEVE JONES: Played with seven different ABA teams, now lives in Portland and broadcasts the NBA on the TNT network.

BILLY KELLER: Former Pacer guard, now lives in Indiana and runs basketball clinics for the Pacers.

JOHNNY KERR: Former general manager of Virginia, now a broadcaster for the Chicago Bulls.

BILLY KNIGHT: Former Pacer star, now works in the team's front office.

BARNEY KREMENKO: Former Nets public relations director.

SLICK LEONARD: Former Pacer coach, now a broadcaster for the team.

GENE LITTLES: Veteran ABA guard, now coach of the Charlotte Hornets.

JOHN LOPEZ: Texas sportswriter who grew up in San Antonio.

KEVIN LOUGHERY: Former Nets coach, now a broadcaster for the Atlanta Hawks.

BOB MACKINNON: Former coach of St. Louis, now player personnel director for the New Jersey Nets.

RUDY MARTZKE: Former public relations man in Miami and general manager in St. Louis, now writer for *USA Today*.

LEE MEADE: First ABA public relations man, now public relations man for a professional volleyball league.

TOM MESCHERY: Former coach of Carolina, now teaches high school in Reno.

GEORGE MIKAN: First ABA commissioner, now a businessman in Minneapolis.

DOUG MOE: Veteran ABA player and coach, now coaching Denver.

JOE MULLANEY: Veteran pro and college coach.

TEDD MUNCHAK: Former owner of the Cougars and ABA commissioner, now in private business in Atlanta.

DENNIS MURPHY: Founder of the ABA, now trying to start a Global Hockey League.

BOB NETOLICKY: Former Pacer forward, now works at the Indianapolis Auto Auction.

PETE NEWELL: Veteran NBA general manager, now a scout with the Cleveland Cavaliers.

TOM NISSALKE: Former coach of Dallas, San Antonio, and Utah, now coach of the Memphis Rockets of the WBL.

JIM O'BRIEN: Covered the ABA for *The Sporting News*, now editor of *Street and Smith's Basketball Magazine*.

DAVE ROBISCH: Veteran ABA player, coaches in the World Basketball League.

BOB RYAN: Writes for the *Boston Globe*.

CARL SCHEER: Former general manager in Carolina and Denver, now general manager of the Denver Nuggets for a second time.

SAM SMITH: Former Floridians broadcaster, now broadcasts Miami Heat games.

LARRY STAVERMAN: First Pacer coach, now works for the Cleveland Stadium Corporation.

TERRY STEMBRIDGE: Former Spurs broadcaster, now in the oil business in Kilgore, Texas.

JOHN STERLING: Former Nets broadcaster, now works in broadcasting in New York.

MIKE STOREN: Former ABA executive, now in public relations.

ROD THORN: Former ABA coach, now director of operations for the NBA.

JOE TAIT: Veteran NBA announcer with the Cleveland Cavaliers.

DICK TINKHAM: Former legal counsel with Indiana, now a lawyer in Indianapolis.

DAVE TWARDZIK: Former Virginia guard, now an assistant with the L.A. Clippers.

JOHN VANAK: Former ABA official, now a private detective.

DAVE VANCE: Former Kentucky general manager, now a racetrack manager in Oklahoma City.

VAN VANCE: Former Kentucky broadcaster, now broadcasts University of Louisville basketball games.

HARRY WELTMAN: Former president of the St. Louis Spirits.

LENNY WILKENS: Veteran NBA player and coach.

CHARLIE WILLIAMS: Former ABA guard, now a sales representative for a steel company in Cleveland.

MAX WILLIAMS: Former Dallas general manager and coach, now in the oil business with Terry Stemberge in Kilgore, Texas.

WAYNE WITT: Public relations man for the San Antonio Spurs.

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