A day in the USBL

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Special Report

World B. Free, Roy Jones Jr., Randy Moss, Nancy Lieberman. Some big names pass through this league. Lesser names, too. Nothing is for certain when it comes to ...

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By Jack Styczynski

Established in 1985 by commissioner Daniel Meisenheimer III and memorably featured that same year by Sports Illustrated, the United States Basketball League bills itself as “The League of Opportunity.” It currently claims 134 USBL-to-NBA success stories, including Manute Bol, John “Hot Rod” Williams, Spud Webb, Michael Adams, Muggsy Bogues, Mario Elie, Avery Johnson, Anthony Mason, Darrell Armstrong, Chris Childs, and Charlie Ward. Others have played the USBL on the backside of their NBA careers, from Micheal Ray Richardson to World B. Free to Roy Tarpley to the latest signee, Oliver Miller. Past coaches include Henry Bibby, John Lucas, Nate “Tiny” Archibald, Rick Barry and Robert Parish. Several more familiar names guide teams this year, among them Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Darryl Dawkins, with the latter back to defend a league title.

As if all that isn’t enough box office, the USBL also has seen Nancy Lieberman, “Hoop Dreams” co-star Arthur Agee, champion boxer Roy Jones Jr., recording artists R. Kelly and Percy “Master P” Miller and the NFL’s Simeon Rice and Randy Moss take the court. This season, Terrell Owens of the San Francisco 49ers suits up, donating his basketball paycheck to charity.

Of course, the USBL has many more people who toil in relative obscurity. Not to be confused with winter circuits such as the older Continental Basketball Association and the newer National Basketball Development League (NBDL), the USBL has 10 teams playing 30 regular season games this spring before a single-elimination tournament decides a champion in late June. On April 19*, Basketball Times was on hand for opening night 2002, featuring a game between the Brooklyn Kings and the expansion Adirondack Wildcats. NBA rules and a red, white, and blue ball, BT chronicles a minor league as it really is.

About 10 minutes past the scheduled tip time of 7 p.m., the game begins in front of a few hundred fans at LIU Brooklyn’s Schwartz Athletic Center, a strange-looking gym converted from the old Paramount Theatre. It’s probably not the venue you’d show to a potential buyer of the publicly traded USBL stock, which hovers around a dollar per share in Manhattan. At the 11:19 mark, Greg Springfield hits an 18-foot jumper for the first points of the contest, putting the host Kings on top 2-0. If you ever watched Springfield play at Hofstra University, seeing this perimeter shot is about as much of a shock as a basketball game in an old theatre. Not that Springfield was a bad player in college, but he was someone who rebounded, set screens, and generally did the dirty work for back-to-back NCAA Tournament teams. The shooters on those squads were Speedy Claxton and Norman Richardson, whose NBA careers Springfield now follows fanatically.

“I’ve been working on my outside shot, still trying to get more confidence on shooting that jumper,” Springfield says. “At Hofstra, I was always the fifth option. Here, I’m still somewhat not an option, but the guys know what I can do, and they have faith in me when I take that outside shot.”

The Kings selected the 6-foot-9 Springfield in the first round of the 2001 USBL draft, and he made the all-rookie team after averaging a “double-double,” his 10.9 rebounds per game ranking third in the league.

It should be noted that USBL draft picks are often based as much on the likelihood a player will sign as they are on his potential, so considering Springfield’s unspectacular statistics in college, his performance could be viewed as surprising.

Unfortunately, things didn’t go so well last fall. After accepting an offer from a Korean club, Springfield left New York on Sept. 10 and got stuck in Anchorage, Alaska, for three days due to the 9/11 tragedy. It may have been an omen, because when he finally arrived in Korea, he got hurt, sideling him for six months. In the meantime, he worked at a Boys’ home and coached an after-school program at a high school in Queens. Now he’s campaigning for another overseas gig, or possibly a tryout in the NBA, “I think once I get my foot

*Greg Springfield and Cordley Edwards tip off another USBL season.
in the door, everybody will know who I am," he says.

Thus, Springfield returns for a second season with Brooklyn, where he seems to relish the physical style of play. "The refs let a little bit more go here in the USBL," he says. "My first game here, I got a welcome to the professional level. I got a couple of hits, a couple of bangs, and I had to get used to it. By maybe my fifth or sixth game I realized, hey, you can get away with certain things."

Still, Springfield misses the college atmosphere.

"That's what I miss the most," he admits. "But one team that do have in this league is Pennsylvania. When you go down there, it's just like college, because their crowd is always behind them 100 percent. When you go there you have to expect to play your hardest, because if you don't, they and their crowd will get you. I look forward to going to Pennsylvania. It reminds me of a Hofstra-Delaware type of atmosphere."

No wonder the ValleyDawgs were last year's USBL champions.

Even when Brooklyn establishes an early 15-10 lead, there's not much enthusiasm in the building, and the little that exists seems to belong to the courtside DJ/MC. It strikes you that the majority of the crowd probably can't afford the expensive ticket prices for the more animated NBA or big-time college atmosphere they could experience by taking a subway ride to Madison Square Garden. Midway through the first quarter, Springfield is on the bench with two fouls. Scott Knapp enters the game for the visiting Wildcats, and three seconds later, draws a 20-foot shot to cut his team's deficit to three.

Unlike Springfield's shot, that's nothing out of the ordinary for Knapp, who was known for his outside marksmanship and instant offense at Siena College, not far from Adirondack's home in Upstate New York. "My job here is to shoot," says the 6-5 guard. "I'm not gonna get tremendous rebounding stats."

At Siena, Knapp scored 1,381 points and played on NIT and NCAA Tournament teams. After graduating last year, he hooked on with the Rockford Lightning of the CBA, and although he had a reduced role from what he experienced in college, his team advanced to the CBA championship game. "I've always been a winner," he declares proudly. "Wherever I've been, we've won."

Since joining the Wildcats after the CBA season ended, Knapp can now compare that league to the USBL. "I'd say the competition in the CBA's a little tougher, but I think the guys here play harder," he says. "I think the CBA is more of a laid back atmosphere because there's 60 games, where here there's only 30. It's only two months, and a lot of the guys are a little younger, I think. The CBA has a little older guys, more seasoned veterans."

Knapp's father, Al, was his high school coach at Vernon-Verona-Sherrill near Syracuse, and coaching may be in his future too. "That's a strong possibility," foresees the son. "I think I've been bred to be a coach, probably more than I've been bred to be a player. I've played since I was 4 or 5 years old, and I really think that I've been taught to coach as well. Playing for a guy like my father who's one of the best high school coaches in the state, playing for (Paul) Hewitt and (Louis) Orr (at Siena), and my professional coaches as well, I've been able to pick up a lot of things. I think that's going to be very useful if I decide to do it."

However, realizing that high school coaches usually need other jobs, Knapp adds, "I think if I'm gonna coach, I'm gonna do it all out and try to make that my occupation. I'd probably try to do the college thing, and try to work my way up until maybe I'll have a team of my own someday."

In the meantime, Knapp continues to play, and claims he will as long as it's still fun and his body cooperates. "I still have a dream to make a lot of money playing basket-ball," he says. "I'm trying like hell to get overseas. It's not easy. I'm not gonna go over if the money's not right. I'm gonna try to get the right situation for myself. I'm not gonna put myself in danger, but I want to get over there in one of the main countries, and hopefully make some money."

Brooklyn extends its lead to 14 points late in the first quarter, but early in the second, Adirondack's Corsley Edwards gets as hot as the old theatre on this unseasonably warm night. He scores six straight points on a pair of breakaway dunks and a jumper, and the margin is once again trimmed to three.

Much like Anthony Mason did when he played in the USBL, Edwards looks like a man among boys on the court. He's listed at 6-9 and 275 pounds, although his mother Deborah insists he's 283. The Wildcats made Edwards their first round pick in April's rookie draft, after he earned Northeast Conference Player of the Year honors and helped Central Connecticut State to the NCAA Tournament for the second time in three seasons. "Big Dog" totaled 1,733 points and 966 rebounds during his college career.

Edwards has left school, because he actually graduated last year. Prior to joining the Wildcats, he participated in the NBA pre-draft camp in Portsmouth, and subsequently received an invitation to the Chicago edition. It's a mild surprise that someone good enough for these camps would risk injury in the USBL, but Edwards' father Corsley Sr. says his son is the type that needs to keep playing.

Naturally, Edwards is hoping to be selected in this year's NBA draft, and you can't help but think that if anybody on the floor has a chance to make the big show, he's the one. The Baltimore native seems even more suited to the professional game than to the college game. "Really physical, the type of game I like to play," is how Edwards explains it. "The refs not calling ticky-tack fouls, they're letting us play. We're men out here."

Furthermore, Edwards looks right at home in the quirky Schwartz Athletic Center, possibly benefiting from several visits while at Central Connecticut.

"There's nothing like this place, I'll tell you that," he chuckles. "When we used to come here from the Northeast Conference, I'd look at it and be like, 'Oh God, what type of gym is this?'"

After a couple of sweet assists and a three-pointer by Knapp, Adirondack has the lead. At halftime, the score is tied, 55-55. During the intermission, USBL public relations director Dennis Truax sits down with Basketball Times.

**BT:** The USBL has been around since 1985 and there's been a lot of turnover of teams, but the league survives. How do you stay afloat?

**TRUAX:** I just think that there's always been a solid core market. Maybe the teams aren't always there for all 17 years, but we've always had teams in good markets, for example, in Florida. Florida's always been a great place. Sometimes in minor league basketball and in all minor league sports, you get the first year, everyone's happy, we've got a new sport in town. The next year, it's kind of all right. The third year, well, maybe it's not so good, and the fourth year, well, I've seen it before, and then it needs to move to a new town. Not just with us, but I think it happens in all minor league sports, especially in the lower levels.

**BT:** A lot of these teams are not close to each other geographically. You've got teams in the Midwest, Florida, and the Northeast. In terms of travel and accommodations, how does the league manipulate getting them around? Do they fly? Do you have an agreement with a hotel chain or do you stay at local colleges?

**TRUAX:** When the teams from the East Coast go out west, you try to make one run through. For these guys, when they go out west, they'll probably fly into St. Louis and they'll move their way west. We have a new sponsorship with American Airlines, so depending on the rates, teams might fly from say Dodge City to Oklahoma if it's an overnight and it's worthwhile financially, but most of the time, you'll fly out and you'll bus to the places. We try to make it so these teams aren't five games in six nights. We try to give them a little bit of rest. Each team has a host hotel, and the (visiting) teams are obligated to come into that host hotel. It works sponsorship-wise where the host team will get free rooms or discounted rooms under the promise that a visiting team will come there.

**BT:** In 1985, when Manute Bol played in the USBL, he made $25,000 for the season. We know nobody out there tonight is making $25,000. Can you give a general idea of what the pay scale is now?

**TRUAX:** We have a salary cap, player-wise for the year, of $47,500 (per team, which averages out to about $400 a week for each player), so if Manute was playing...
Tiny’s big heart

Two days after the opener, Basketball Hall of Famer and New York native Nate “Tiny” Archibald was on hand to conduct a clinic for children prior to a rematch between the Kings and Wildcats.

As part of the NBA’s “Read to Achieve” program, he had the opportunity to teach lessons both on and off the court. “We talk about the importance of getting an education,” said Archibald, understanding that the kids’ hoop dreams are what afforded him this forum. “The fundamentals that we’re trying to stress are reading, writing, and arithmetic. Those are the things that are not being emphasized.”

According to Tiny, the “three R’s” aren’t the only things scarce in today’s society. He listed teamwork, positive attitudes, sportsmanship, discipline and respect as often lacking as well.

And I’m not talking about just for the kids,” he says. “We’re talking about the whole family. We’re talking about the parents who go to games, who don’t show good sportsmanship, who beat people up with baseball bats and stuff like that because the referee or the umpire is making a bad call.”

That’s why Archibald keeps teaching life’s fundamentals to anyone who’ll listen. “I’ve been involved in the game of life for a long time. I’ve been doing that long before the NBA had a ‘Read to Achieve’ program.”

Most basketball fans know that Tiny is the only player in history to lead the NBA in both scoring and assists in the same year, and that he later won a league title with the Boston Celtics. But few know he received his Masters degree from Fordham University after his playing days and is currently pursuing his Doctorate. And not many know he spent two seasons in the USBL coaching the now-defunct Connecticut Skyhawks.

“It was a great learning and teaching experience for me,” Archibald says. “I had a great time up in Connecticut.”

More recently, Tiny was a head coach in the National Basketball Development League before resigning in January to take a job in the NBA’s community relations department.

Although he believes professional coaching is still in his blood, it’s not his sole interest. “I coach kids in the summertime, and I love it. I’m not looking for any payment. My reward is for them to go out and do some of the things on the floor that we do in practice. That’s my satisfaction.”

For the former NBA players now coaching in the USBL, Archibald had some simple advice. “Enjoy what you’re doing, hopefully sooner or later, it will pay big dividends,” he says, adding that they should also be teaching their young players about life off the court.

And by the way, Tiny is high on Adirondack rookie Corley Edwards, although he observed the player’s listed height of 6-9 may be overestimated to the extent Edwards’ mother says his listed weight is underestimated. “I like him. I like his aggressiveness. I like his passion. I like his size. I’m just saying, can he get to the next level with his position that he plays? Most of the time when you see him, he’s playing the post-up game. He looks to me about 6-7, 6-8,” said Archibald, before saying Edwards could be a good one if he becomes a bit more versatile.

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