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In the 21st round of the NBA draft, the Sonics pick ...

JOHN MCGRATH; THE NEWS TRIBUNE
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Aside from owning gold medals, American Olympic legends Carl Lewis, Bob Beamon and Bruce Jenner share something in common.

Before television dictated that the show be trimmed to fit into a cable-network window, each was selected in the NBA draft.

So was Paul Funkhouser, from McKendress, and Ducky Potter, from Moravian. I guess it's best that the draft doesn't dawdle on for days at a time anymore – it once went as long as 21 rounds, the kind of unthinkable notion associated with bare-knuckled fight cards featuring John L. Sullivan – but streamlining has a price.

It seriously reduces any potential claims to fame by the Paul Funkhousers and Ducky Potters of the world.

The draft is Thursday afternoon and, like most sports fans in the Pacific Northwest, I'll tune in to ESPN to make sure the long delay since the lottery hasn't made the Seattle SuperSonics as stupid as it made the 2006 Houston Texans, who picked defensive end Mario Williams after passing on the electrifying Reggie Bush and the mesmerizing Vince Young.

But the NBA draft hasn't been the same for me since 1988, when it was cut to three rounds. The following year, it was trimmed again, to two rounds.

In the spirit of a machete applied to a thicket of eye-high weeds, the draft has been transformed from a goofy marathon to an all-business operation replete with "brain trusts" and "war rooms." Worst of all, those chosen to play at The Next Level are, without exception, authentic basketball players.

In 1967, for instance, the Baltimore Bullets took Bubba Smith, the defensive lineman from Michigan State. That the Bullets spent an 11th-round selection on somebody who already had been taken first overall in the NFL draft could be interpreted as an acknowledgement they were grasping at straws – or had visions of the former high school basketball player going the dual-career route.

(“When hearing tales of Bubba Smith – you wonder, is he man or myth?” – Ogden Nash.)

In any case, even though every other team in the league eventually dropped out of the draft, the Bullets kept on firing until the 20th round, by which time they selected Roland West, a 6-foot-4 forward from the University of Cincinnati. He ended up playing in four games.

The beauty of a draft in which as many as 239 college players were selected was the possibility that anybody could emulate Roland West. The downside? A lot of observers' heads exploded. Atlanta used its 13th-round choice in 1971 on Ed Jenkins from Michigan Lutheran, not to be confused with the Ed Jenkins taken by Detroit from Shaw in the 19th round, or the LeRoy Jenkins taken by Detroit, from the University of Detroit, in the 17th round.

Nothing is forever, but the NBA draft came close. You'd think that when the Phoenix Suns took Beamon – then the world-record holder in the long jump – from Texas-El Paso in the 15th round of the 1969 draft, it was their way of saying, “We're through, thank you very much. Now we're just being silly.”

But the Suns weren't through. They chose Wayne Huckel and Howie Dickerman and Al Nuñez and Solomon Davis and, finally, Jim Plump.

The most unconventional selection of the old-school draft? That would have to be Lucy Harris, a seventh-rounder from Delta State who went to the New Orleans Jazz in 1977. The only woman drafted by a major American sports league, Harris' status as a groundbreaker did not translate into a roster spot the following fall.

At least she had the satisfaction of being taken two spots ahead of Jenner, the decathlete from Graceland (Iowa) College. He went to Kansas City.

If Harris' selection opened eyes, the Celtics' decision to take Landon Turner with the last pick of the 1982 draft warmed hearts. Turner was paralyzed in a traffic accident; his college coach at Indiana, Bob Knight, talked Boston's Red Auerbach into selecting Turner as a way to raise awareness about the financial drain the accident had taken on the ailing player's family.

Turns out Knight was more persuasive with Auerbach than he was with Stu Inman, the late Portland Trail Blazers general manager. Knight suggested the Blazers take Michael Jordan with the No. 2 pick in 1984, but Portland – adhering to the conventional wisdom – went big with Sam Bowie. That left Jordan to the Bulls, who, having secured their lucky-for-life ticket, spent their 10th choice on Carl Lewis, then in the peerless prime of his track-and-field career.

A few late-round finds turned out to be gems. Mario Elie, a 1985 seventh-rounder from American International, enjoyed several productive years. And Randy Smith, a 14th-rounder from Buffalo State, turned into a steal. (Literally: He turned into 1,403 steals, and the stat wasn't even recognized as official until his third season in the league.)

For the most part, though, the names from the discontinued fringe rounds are familiar only in hindsight: Bill Raftery, the college basketball commentator, was a 14th-rounder, as was Pete Gent, the Cowboys tight end who gained acclaim as the author of “North Dallas Forty.”

Tony Gwynn wasn't picked by the San Diego Clippers as a novelty item in 1981 – he was a precision-passing point guard at San Diego State – which can't be said of UCLA safety Kenny Easley, taken by Chicago in the same draft.

Gwynn and Easley, of course, achieved prominence in other arenas. I'm not sure what happened to Jolly Spight, Milwaukee's 10th-round selection in 1972. Or Lonny Klutzz, Chicago's sixth-round selection in 1970. Or Mallory Chestnutt, the Lakers' 13th-round selection in 1969.

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